Reign
of the SEVEN
SPELLBLADES
IV
Bokuto Uno
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Ruria Miyuki

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IV
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"You're—!"
Oliver Horn
Teresa Carste
"You saved me. The headmistress was so, so scary...! Please don't leave me!"
(...What are you doing, Ms. Carste?)

"...You think you can say whatever you like...? W-well, not—not with me around...!"
Guy Greenwood
Katie Aalto
Pete Reston
"Outside. I ain't in the mood for sorrys."
"Heads on the floor and beg Oliver for mercy. Now!"

Nanao Hibiya
"Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya— would you join the Campus Watch?"
Alvin Godfrey

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Reign of the Seven Spellblades

IV

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Ruria Miyuki

YEN ON

New York

Copyright

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Bokuto Uno
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Characters

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Second-Years

Oliver Horn
The story's protagonist. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Swore revenge on the seven instructors who killed his mother.

Nanao Hibiya
A samurai girl from Azia. Believes that Oliver is her destined sword partner.

Katie Aalto
A girl from Farnland, a nation belonging to the Union. Has a soft spot for the civil rights of demi-humans.

Guy Greenwood
A boy from a family of magical farmers. Honest and friendly. Has a knack for magical flora.

Pete Reston
A studious boy born to nonmagicals. Capable of switching between male and female bodies.

Michela McFarlane
Eldest daughter of the prolific McFarlane family. A master of the pen and sword, she looks out for her friends.

Tullio Rossi
A lone wolf who taught himself the sword by ignoring the fundamentals. Lost to Oliver in a duel.

Stacy Cornwallis
A girl born to a McFarlane branch family. Michela's younger half sister.

Fay Willock
A half-werewolf taken in by Stacy. Serves as her attendant.

Richard Andrews
Heir of the Andrews nobility. Currently searching for a new purpose in life after fighting Oliver and Nanao.

Joseph Albright
An arrogant boy born to the militaristic Albright family. Lost to Oliver in a duel.

Fifth-Years

Vera Miligan
A witch who supports demi-human rights. Fought Oliver and his friends over Katie but has since taken an interest in the group.

Diana Ashbury
Kimberly's top broomsport athlete. Nanao's broomriding skills catch her attention.

Sixth-Years

Alvin Godfrey
Student council president. Nicknamed Purgatory by his peers. Boasts incredible firepower.

Cyrus Rivermoore
A necromancer who controls the bones of the dead. Equally as dangerous as Ophelia.

Shannon Sherwood
A gentle girl and Oliver's cousin. Supports Oliver's secret activities as his vassal.

Gwyn Sherwood
A quiet young man and Oliver's cousin. Supports Oliver's secret activities as his vassal.

Instructors

Enrico Forghieri
Magical engineering instructor. Prone to outrageous lessons designed to maim students.

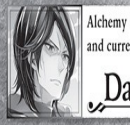
Theodore McFarlane
Chela's father and the man who sent Nanao to Kimberly.

Esmeralda
Kimberly's headmistress. Proudly stands at the apex of magical society.

First-Years

Teresa Carste
Oliver's closest vassal, aiding his revenge as a covert operative. Moves on her own terms and shows few emotions.

Vanessa Aldiss
Magical biology instructor. Feared by her students for her wild personality.



Darius Grenville
Alchemy instructor. Slain by Oliver and currently considered missing.

Frances Gilchrist　Luther Garland　Dustin Hedges

Prologue

Prologue

“I am Esmeralda, your headmistress. Do you know how many students died last year?”

Her chilling tone resonated in the ears of every new student in the auditorium. The Kimberly witch glared down from the stage, sinking her talons into their very hearts with another statement:

“Sixteen. *Comparatively few.* Though many more came close.”

A chorus of gulps. To the fledging mages who’d only just passed through the front gates, that was a very *specific* number. Enough to rattle even those aware of the dangers here.

“…Oh-ho, so she hits ’em with that every year?”

“Guy, shhh!”

The witch’s voice, devoid of any warmth, along with the gasps and restless motions of her terrified audience—that was all the information that reached the one group waiting down below. But it was enough for them to know that this fresh crop of students looked just like they themselves had a year before.

“I know not if this year’s number will be higher or lower,” the headmistress continued. “But I can say this—I don’t even *want* it to end without incident. Quite the opposite. I care not how much blood is spilled. No matter how many corpses pile up, if the results outweigh the sacrifices—so be it.”

Thus, the group came to know the true nature of this institution. Their anticipation was torn out by the roots, replaced with a rising urge to get out while they still could. This was the first dose of harsh medicine all first-years received—and the first step Kimberly students took to surviving in the demonic campus.

“In that sense, several of last year’s losses were *not* in vain. They had *results*. And thus, they were students of *value*.”

“……”

Oliver grimaced, well aware of the two students she meant. That was not something he could accept—he could never call their final moments *results*.

“What will become of you all? Will you perish with results or die a dog’s death? Or live a life of frivolity, disappointing me beyond measure?” the headmistress asked the crowd. “The choice is yours. This institution offers freedom. Your results are your responsibility. Those who polish their skills will find them tried. Those who neglect their studies will find themselves judged. Thus—if you deem yourself the latter, I invite you to leave. The door is over there.”

Perhaps the witch’s merciless speech was her way of expressing kindness. Leaving *was* an option. And if your life mattered to you, that option was undoubtedly the best one. No one questioned that.

But this year, once more—nobody turned heel. The fresh crop stood their ground, suppressing their shivers. Their strength of will triumphed over their fears—or, perhaps, they were already prisoners of sorcerous fate.

"You remain? Then for now, we welcome you."

With that, the headmistress drew her white wand and uttered a short incantation. Instantly, the floor of the entire auditorium vanished into thin air—leaving nothing below the new students' feet.

""""""""""""Aughhhh?!""""""""""""

The jaws of hell yawned open, and the students plunged headfirst into the depths. However—a moment later, chairs gently caught them. Blinking, they found themselves surrounded by tables, laden with food; among these stood upperclassmen, welcoming them with smiles.

"Welcome to Kimberly. Forget everything you just heard," Oliver said. He moved to the nearest table and started pouring drinks.

At the next table, Katie called out, "Don't let her threats get you down! Your seniors are here for you!"

"Some of us are pretty nasty, though! But hey, get your grub on." Guy was filling plates with food and handing them out.

At yet another table, a girl with ringlets was using her most reassuring tones. "We all know the terrors this place holds. But you are not alone. You will find friends among the older students and within your own year."

"…She's right," Pete muttered, topping up the new kids' glasses.

Above his head, broomriding students flew by, leaving trails of gold in their wake. The crowd stared upward, eyes wide.

"Find yourself some worthy comrades!" one Azian rider's voice boomed, carrying across the auditorium. "That alone shall make your time here enjoyable beyond measure!"

By now the mood had shifted completely. The fear had melted from the new crop's faces, their complexions much improved.

"You may talk among yourselves," the headmistress decreed. "Eat, drink, and make merry as you see fit."

The noise levels rose quickly. No longer feeling like they had knives at their throats, the newbies grew eager to talk.

"Aughhhhh, that was terrifying!"

"Don't cry! N-nothin' to be scared of here! That was just a ch-ch-cheap threat! I didn't let it get to me at all!"

Where one boy was quivering, his friend was stubbornly denying everything the headmistress had said. He had his arms tightly crossed—keeping them still—but this did not hide how wet his eyes were.

A girl with curly hair spotted this and quickly brought them drinks. "There, there. It *was* scary, but it's all safe now. Have some white grape juice."

"Like I said, I wasn't scared!"

"*Sniffle.* Urgh… Wow, that's good…"

Katie's gentle voice and the clurichauns' sweet nectar dried the two boys' tears. Similar scenes were happening at tables all around the Great Auditorium.

"Yo, you from a magic farm, too?" Guy asked one first-year. "Only a fellow farmhand's got a build like that."

"Uh, yeah… Whereabouts is yours?"

"Inland, to the east. You're in the industry—the name Greenwood ring a bell?"

"…Second-place tomato three years back?"

"Damn, you remember *that*? It's my old lady's hobby. She makes me help tend 'em—a real pain, lemme tell ya. If they taste good, who cares what they look like?!"

Even shy kids opened up once Guy found something in common with them. Oliver glanced at his friends, impressed, then turned his eyes elsewhere.

"I—I don't know if I can make it here… I'm from a nonmagical family…"

"Don't worry—so am I," said Pete. "It certainly can be brutal, but there's people out there you can trust. If you get scared, just come to me. My friends'll help, too."

"What's *not* to be scared of here…?"

Pete had never been the most outgoing, but he was doing his best to look after the new faces. Oliver couldn't help but grin. Pete knew better than anyone how scary this place was for students from ordinary origins. He could take care of them.

"Restrooms are this way. Come! We shall be your guides!"

"You can't enjoy a party if you're holding it in! The call of nature is nothing to be ashamed of!"

Oliver turned to find Nanao and Chela assisting in a broader sense, escorting a number of first-years out of the auditorium. Chela was pretty much always in this mode, but Nanao was clearly getting a kick out of her newfound seniority. A year ago, she had just arrived in these lands and been baffled by all manner of things.

"Pipe down, you nobodies," a familiar voice growled behind Oliver. He flinched, spinning toward it, and found a large, arrogant boy leading a number of new kids.

"Mr. Albright… And who are these with you?"

"Lost their friends when the floor dropped out. Figured if we group the lost nobodies together, they'll be easier to find."

"…How nice of you."

"Take your eyes off a nobody for one second and they fall to pieces. Had to be done."

He put on a show of annoyance, but it was clear this came naturally to him. With that brief exchange, Albright left the auditorium with his group in tow. Oliver was astounded—he hadn't expected Albright to look after *anyone*.

But as he turned away, a new kid at the edge of his vision bumped into a soup tureen.

"?! Look out!"

Oliver was already moving. He slipped between the rocking tureen and the kid, using his robe to shield the freshman from the scalding splash. He drew his white wand, but before he could chant a spell, the tureen stabilized.

"Thank you," came a soft voice from in his arms. He looked down…and barely stopped himself from yelping aloud.

"You're—!"

"You saved me. The headmistress was so, so scary…! Please don't leave me!"

The girl wrapped her arms around him, her voice trembling. She was small even for her age. He'd never seen her in uniform before, but that didn't prove much of a disguise.

(…What are you doing, Ms. Carste?)

Not hiding his discomfort, he spoke via the mana frequency cypher. The girl in his arms was one of his vassals—a skilled covert operative named Teresa Carste. She responded in kind.

(I felt a need for us to establish a cover relationship, my lord. I will be following you around like a puppy, so please play along.)

(You couldn't come up with anything less strange?)

(No one thinks it's strange. Not even your friends.)

She glanced to one side, and Oliver followed her gaze—and found Katie and Guy sharing a table nearby.

"Oh? Got yourself a li'l puppy there, Oliver? Hey, how 'bout you folks join us?"

"Let's get the whole gang together! There's much we need to teach these new kids!"

They were both beckoning, and Teresa managed to communicate a smirk via mana frequency alone.

(Two very clueless—ahem, nice friends.)

(Not a fan of that sarcasm. Don't let me hear it again.)

(I beg your pardon. But…these friends are just part of your cover, yes?)

As they headed toward said friends, Oliver let this accusation settle in. After a long pause, he managed a response.

(…I've never been able to compartmentalize these things.)

No use trying to hide it. Teresa responded with a loaded silence. Things remained tense as they reached the others, but nobody seemed to notice—Katie was already chattering away.

"Come on over! Better late than never—I'm Katie Aalto, a second-year. What are your names?"

There was an awkward hush as everyone wondered who would speak up first. One of the boys stepped forward, dispelling the awkwardness.

"…Dean Travers! Nice to meetcha."

“Oh, um…Peter Cornish. Dean and I grew up together.”

“Rita Appleton. Um, and you are…?”

Dean had made it easier for the others. Peter seemed mild-mannered; Rita, as shy as she was tall. She was looking across the table at Teresa with evident curiosity. She failed to finish her question but got an answer anyway.

“My name is Teresa Carste. Nice to meet you. It’s a relief to see such friendly faces on my first day.”

“Sheesh, you’re a real pip-squeak! Don’t they feed you at home?”

“Guy! Don’t be rude!”

Katie slapped him upside the head. Oliver glanced down and found a big, friendly smile on Teresa’s face. Or rather—a mask she wore.

“I don’t mind. You’re very tall,” Teresa said back to Guy. “And…so are you, Ms. Appleton. I assumed you were a second-year.”

“Erk…I—I get that a lot. I don’t know why I shot up like this…”

The conversational ricochet seemed to hit Rita where it hurt, and she visibly sulked.

Guy just looked puzzled. “How could big be bad? It never is with veggies.”

“But if vegetables get too big, they get discarded before they even go to market…”

“Big is good! The bigger the troll, the higher the survival rate!”

“Whoa, Katie!” Oliver cut in. “I know you *meant* that in a nice way, but still!”

Across the table, the two boys Katie had brought along—Dean and Peter—were struggling to find an opening in the conversation.

“They’re both girls… What do we even say to them?”

“Don’t chicken out! Just act natural! Like me!”

Dean’s idea of acting natural seemed to involve stuffing his face. But Katie had something to say about that.

“You’ve got pie on your cheek. Stay still; I’ll get it off.”

“Erk—!”

Dean turned bright red but made no attempt to resist a few dabs from Katie’s handkerchief, which made Oliver chuckle. Dean was trying to play it cool but clearly didn’t have it in him to brush off a kind gesture. That made him a lot more approachable than Pete had been this time last year.

“……”

Oliver looked around. The first-years were all settled in at one table or another, and the welcoming party was in full swing. But the good cheer felt like a baleful mirror held up against the scene replaying in his mind’s eye.

*

“Carlos…!”

“Sniff…”

“…No…!”

The lights in the hall were dim, as if not wishing to rouse the dead from their slumber. Students filed through the darkened space, mourners choking back sobs and whispering the names of the departed.

While many students normally altered and adjusted their school uniforms, today nearly everyone had them worn to spec, perhaps in lieu of funeral garb. It was a custom no one mentioned aloud yet all followed instinctively. This was how mages handled death—something that walked hand in hand with each of them.

“…Senior Whitrow was well loved,” said Chela. “Just look at all the people here for them…”

“…Yeah.”

Oliver could offer only a single word and a quiet nod. The six friends were clustered toward the back, observing their first Kimberly funeral procession. Unlike nonmagical ceremonies, mage funerals had no scriptures or homilies. Their lives were too tinged with darkness to wish for anything as grand as a peaceful rest or a soul’s salvation.

As the funeral drew to a close, the last of the student procession filed out of the hall. Those who lingered were friends and loved ones, all grappling with grief beyond words. Oliver and his group decided to join them in paying their respects.

“…You came,” someone said.

The group straightened up, turning toward the speaker. They’d met this young man before, but his cheeks looked hollow—he had been closer to the departed than anyone.

“President Godfrey.”

“No need for such formalities. The joint funeral is an annual ritual. Presumably it wouldn’t be held if everyone survived the year—but in the five years I’ve been here, *that’s* never happened. I elected not to investigate, but I imagine it’s been that way since the founding.”

Godfrey’s gaze turned toward the altar. Sixteen coffins in a row, but fewer than half had any remains within. Where nobody was left, or could be recovered, the departed’s belongings were used instead. This included the two whose final moments Oliver and his friends had witnessed together.

“And every year I’ve known someone up there,” Godfrey continued. “Still…this year shook me to my core.”

“…I can imagine,” Oliver said, speaking for everyone. He felt ashamed that he could muster nothing more than this trite platitude.

“Thank you,” Godfrey replied, his smile wan. “But there is a saving grace. I’m glad Carlos got there in time to be with her. And that you all survived.”

He clapped Oliver on the shoulder, then made his way to another mourner. As they watched him go, a new voice spoke from behind:

“Goodness, this is always so gloomy. I can barely breathe.”

“…Ms. Miligan.”

They turned to find the Snake-Eyed Witch standing there. She'd been gravely injured in the fight with Ophelia, but her treatment had gone swimmingly, and she was in full health once more. The students who'd been captured with Pete—Albright and Fay included—had all been rescued successfully. Ultimately, not a single student captured by the chimera had perished—the sole silver lining in this tragedy.

Seeing the six pairs of eyes on her, Miligan continued, sounding impressed. "What a conscientious bunch. Even Pete came. I would have loved nothing more than to make excuses not to be here…but this time I had to make amends."

"Amends…to who?"

"To Ophelia. I said some pretty awful things."

Her gaze was on the altar. The row of coffins was bedecked with colorful flowers, but in front of Ophelia's—was a pumpkin pie. Godfrey had asked for this in lieu of flowers. The sight made Oliver's chest ache. He'd never spoken to her much, but he did remember her mentioning her love of pie.

"*'I wouldn't debase myself like that.'* How dare I? I've debased myself more than anyone there, excusing it all as necessary for my survival."

Miligan's rancor was directed entirely inward. She'd made all those crass remarks in the throes of battle, intentionally trying to infuriate Ophelia and trip her up. It had worked—and that made her remarks all the more cruel.

Sharing that guilt, Chela slowly shook her head.

"…Then we are no better," she said. "For it was your words that saved our lives."

That brought a smile to Miligan's face. She patted Chela on the head, then took her leave.

"…So it's like this every year?" Katie said. "All these coffins lined up…"

She looked at the mourners by the altar, choking back tears. Her fists trembled. These emotions had been raging within since the funeral began, and now they came spilling out.

"……Why?" she asked.

"Katie…"

Knowing how she felt, Oliver put a hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her. But she wasn't stopping. She was the only one unable to bottle this up.

"Why—why is it *normal* that people here have to die? Because we're mages? Who decided *that*? Who decreed that we can't be happy? That we're never allowed to smile?"

She objected. To the common lot of sorcery, to the conception of life and death that defined the lives of all mages. Oliver could not stop her. He knew this was her greatest strength—and the thorn that kept blood flowing from her soul.

"I just can't…*accept* this. Not ever."

*

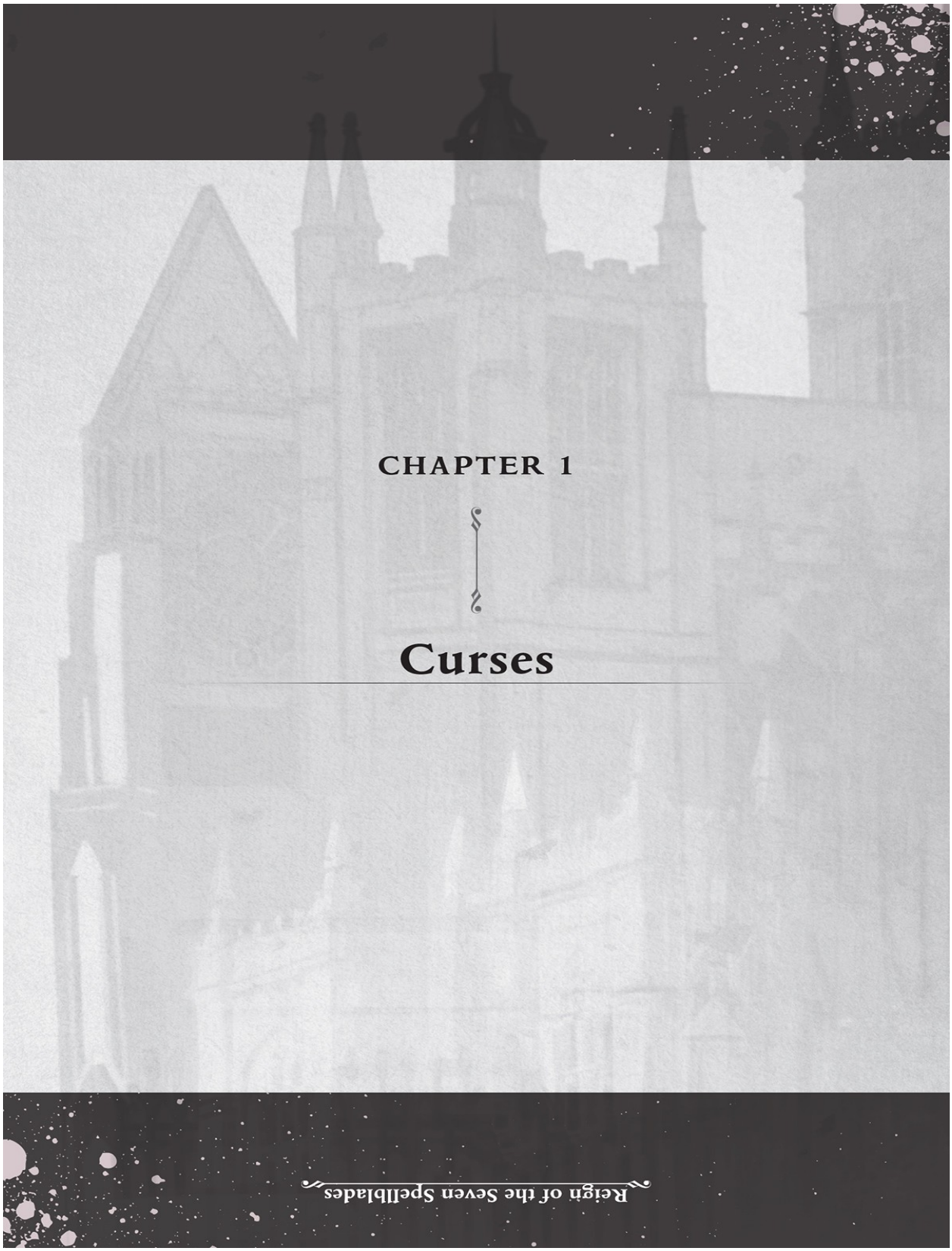
"…Oliver? What's wrong, Oliver?"

A voice dragged him out of his reverie—the same voice he'd just been thinking about. He looked up to find everyone staring at him. His sudden silence had stood out in the merrymaking. He quickly tried to recover.

"Oh, sorry. Drifted off for a moment… Can't have that. This year, we're the upperclassmen."

With that, he slapped his cheeks and faced the four new kids.

"We've all been saved by older students. And we'd like to pay that forward. If you need anything, feel free to ask. As long as it's within our power—we can help."



CHAPTER 1

Curses

CHAPTER 1

Curses

For Kimberly students, advancing a year meant stepping one foot deeper into darkness. Case in point: the newest subject on their curriculum.

"…Man, everyone's looking extra tense," Guy said. "It's a new subject; I get it. Still, though…"

Every seat was full, but the room was eerily quiet.

"This is exactly how tense they should be," Chela replied. "We're here to study curses—and out of all fields of magic, few are as perilous to handle."

"Curses, huh…?" said Katie. "My mom and dad never told me anything about those, so I'm not very familiar myself. You say they're dangerous? Also, what's with this water?"

Katie gestured at the table. There was a jug of water in front of their usual group of six gathered around a large worktable with sinks on both sides. Very similar to alchemy class.

"As with any field, a mistake could cost your life," Oliver explained, his voice grim. "But since harming others is the *purpose* of curses, mistakes are that much more dangerous. If other magical techniques are medicine, then curses are like diseases. If you're not careful, they can do some real damage—on a more basic level, they corrupt our bodies and minds."

Pete frowned. "…That makes it sound like curses have no benefits at all. What are we studying this for anyway?"

"Well, for one thing—they *do* have their uses. If you've got to exterminate a large number of pests, the sympathetic aspect of curses is very useful. I'll omit the particulars, but it's possible to slaughter an entire swarm with a single curse. I've heard some mages can even wipe out an entire species."

"An entire species?!" Katie wailed. "That's so extreme!"

"Hmm, could be handy for getting bad insects outta the fields," Guy said, clearly interested.

Not the first time these two had taken polar-opposite positions. Oliver started to grin—but then he shuddered, feeling like a caterpillar was crawling up his spine.

"That's all the time we have for talk. She's here," he said, glancing toward the entrance.

Everyone followed his gaze.

The door opened—and darkness poured in.

"Wha—?"

"Eek…?!"

Without exception, every student felt a chill so powerful it gave them instant goose bumps. This was both fear—and a compulsive revulsion. Like the way humans instinctively recoil from the sight of an insect swarm.

The mass of darkness flowed through the doors and slid across the floor. When it reached the podium, corpse-pale hands emerged from within, along with a face—one unsettlingly young. Only then did the students realize that this was not some eldritch mass of darkness, but a woman clad in pitch-black rags.

"…Welcome to your second year. Sorry if I alarmed you."

The voice was unnerving, like a sheep with a crushed larynx. The edges of both lips curled upward, and every student jerked back, their chair legs clattering. None of them had ever seen a smile where the absence of it was infinitely preferable.

"First, let me say hello. I am the curse instructor, Baldia Muwezicamili. I may not look much older than you, but I'm as old as Vana. The cause is a curse, you see; my body is unable to age further. Oh, by Vana I mean Vanessa."

Her pupils thought this had to be some sick joke. Who would have a nickname for that monster? No…this woman just might. Her and her alone.

"First day of classes is always core theory, but first, a vital warning. Don't ever touch me; and don't ever touch anything I've touched until I give express permission. Do not step where I have walked. And probably best if you don't spend more than two hours in the same space as me. Fail to the follow these rules, and it may prove catching."

Her tone was bright and cordial and the content beyond ominous. A pale hand clutched to her chest, she spoke ruefully. "As you can see, I am extremely cursed. I've long since lost track of how many curses I'm harboring. But I'm fairly sure it's a world record. For example, let's see…"

She pointed to the rear of the class, and the students reflexively turned to look. There were plants in a row at the back—that were turning brown before their very eyes. Baldia met her pupils' looks of horror with a fond smile and continued.

"Plants with no resistances end up like that. Just growing in the same room as me, they wither away. You're all mages, so you can hold out for a while, but any nonmagical people would have already died. And that's what'll happen to you if you forget those warnings, okay?"

By this point, several students had their hands over their mouths. Seeing them start to rise, Baldia nodded, clearly used to this.

"That's right; if you feel it coming up, use the sinks. Don't try and hold it in. This is your body's natural defense mechanism. It is *perfectly normal* to become nauseated if you are in a room with me. Nothing to be concerned about at all."

Before her speech was even over, several students had emptied their stomachs, Pete among them; Oliver stood up, patting his friend's back. And Pete wasn't the only one affected.

"……"

"Guy…!"

Chela spotted it first. His usual vitality drained, the tall boy was sitting very still, his face ashen, making no sounds at all. Baldia spotted this from across the room and turned toward him.

"Mm? You there, didn't you hear? Don't hold it in. Puke away."

"…No, thanks. I don't wanna puke just from seeing someone's face for the first time."

"Ohhh?" Baldia's smile deepened. She left the podium, oozing across the floor like viscous fluid—or perhaps like an entire swarm of burrowing insects. "How sweet. How nice. It's been years since anyone said that! … What's your name?"

"…Guy G-Greenwood."

"Guy! Heh-heh-heh. You're adorable. And so big! A regular hunk."

The closer she got, the more nauseated he became. Guy clenched his jaw, trying to fight it. Soon, she was right in front of him, her pale face leaning in.

"But this won't do. Go on. Barf."

"Urp…!"

Hearing her voice right in his ears was too much. He toppled forward, vomit forcing itself up his throat. His friends quickly stepped in. Oliver's spell caught the puke, sweeping it into the sink, and Chela's healing spell eased his pain.

"Well done," Baldia said, obviously pleased. "If you upchucked today, don't worry. Two or three more classes and you won't need to puke anymore. Once you're done, there's scented water on the desks; just gargle with that, and your mouth will thank you for it."

That's what the water was for. It all made sense now. Oliver had to admit, albeit begrudgingly, that it was a smart choice.

Guy was still breathing heavily, and Katie came rushing to his side.

"Guy, are you okay?! Should we go to the infirmary?!"

"……No…I'm fine. It's easing up…"

He staggered to his feet and managed to make it back to his chair. Baldia gave him one last sinister smile, then returned to the podium.

"Everyone's settled down? Then let's start in on theory," she began. "First, what *is* a curse? Well, quite simply, a curse is a communicable disease carried by immaterial connections: speaking with someone, being from the same region as them, falling so in love them that you can't sleep. These relationships can all be conduits for the transmission of a curse."

She was just launching into a lecture, as if nothing odd had happened. That forced everyone to realize—no matter how many students threw up, it would not qualify as a problem *here*.

"The nature and strength of that relationship will determine which types of curses you can use. There's a distinct tendency for tight, interwoven, insular connections to make curses easier to cultivate. Just like mold grows

if you don't air the room out. It's the same thing! You choose the environment, follow the steps to cultivate it, and then release it upon the target—that's the basic procedure for any major curse. Remember it!"

"…!"

Oliver heard a pen scratching. Scented water in one hand, Pete had recovered from his nausea, and was frantically taking notes. Everyone focused on Baldia's lecture.

"Curses are lonely things. They're born from relationships, so they are always looking for someone to affect, always desperate to find someone else to infect." She continued: "Nonmagical people have a superstition that a cold is cured when someone else catches it. With curses, this is partially true. If you choose an appropriate target and follow the appropriate steps, the curse *will* move to them. Naturally, this does not solve the real problem, but it's a common stopgap procedure when trying to break a curse."

Her voice was tinged with irony—yet with an undercurrent of tenderness. As if this lecture on curses was actually describing herself.

"But there are times when that is the *only* option. If a curse has grown too large, nobody can break it. When that happens, all you can do is locate a suitable container and trap it. Like so!"

As she spoke, Baldia pulled open the front of her black garb, exposing what lay beneath—the sight of which made every student gasp: Multiple twisted faces bulged from the pale skin of her chest. The growths had eyes that moved, balefully glaring at their observers.

"Some of the curses I harbor are so powerful they could wipe out the human race if they got free. If a curse becomes impossible to control, we call it a maelstrom. Historically, entire countries have been burned to the ground in an attempt to stop a maelstrom's spread," Baldia explained. "That's the thing, really. The way curses work, if you screw up—it isn't just the caster who dies. Everyone close to them will perish in turn, and in the worst-case scenario, the casualties can spread beyond your wildest imaginings."

Every student *knew*—the instructor before them was that exact worst-case scenario personified. Baldia Muwezicamili was the destination of an overgrown curse—the sorcerer who swallowed maelstroms whole.

"In my class, you must always keep that thought in mind. You don't want to hurt your friends…do you?"

"…She was the scariest yet," Katie sad.

Class had ended, and it was lunchtime. The group had gathered around a table in the Fellowship.

"We've had a lot of mean teachers, but…she's different. I feel like she'd actually listen, maybe even care about our feelings," Katie continued. "But that's *why* she's so scary. The closer you get to her, the closer her curses get to us. The friendlier she is, the more understanding, the more we like her—I just know all those feelings will invite the curses in. And I feel like part of her *wants* that."

Everyone let Katie's words sink in. They simply listened in silence, no one adding any comments of their own.

"I was aware that curse bearers existed. I just…figured you could approach them like poisonous animals, you know? If they meant no harm, nothing bad would happen. If you're sincere and patient, you can build a good rapport," she explained. "But…that's not right at all, is it? Doesn't matter if they're malicious—*connecting* to them is all it takes. With poison, you have to be careful—but that won't help with curses. The more sincere you are, the more *kindness* you show…the more likely that is to come back and bite you."

And the knowledge that something that ironic could exist was especially hard for her to bear. Oliver knew the entire field of curses was fundamentally incompatible with Katie Aalto's very being.

"I know it's frustrating, but you're exactly right," he told her as he stirred sugar into his tea. "The simplest and most effective way to avoid curses is to avoid all contact with whoever's harboring them. Show no interest, pay no attention, remain stubbornly indifferent. That way you can never be cursed…but that's easier said than done."

Across the table, Chela was nodding. "Yes, that's an entirely impractical approach. If they're right in front of you, and you can see and hear them—it's already impossible to remain indifferent. It's not just humans—creatures of all walks of life depend on relations with others. The fact that animals, insects, and plants are susceptible to curses proves it."

People couldn't simply avoid curse bearers. Being alive required connections to things around you.

"A famous mage once expressed that universal concept as follows: 'Truly, curses laugh at all life equally.'"

A grim hush settled over the table. All six friends felt a strange chill, but not because of Baldia Muwezicamili specifically—they felt as if they'd caught a glimpse of the colossal malice lurking beneath the world's surface.

"…I didn't find her scary," Guy muttered, breaking the silence. All eyes turned toward him. "She just seemed lonely to me… For all her talk about barfing." He sighed.

"…Guy," Oliver said, mildly alarmed. "I don't mean to tell you how you should feel, but that's a dangerous impression to have. This is true for mages in general, but people who are good at curses are often highly charismatic. That makes it easier for them to build connections to others—it's easier to curse someone who *likes* you."

"I get the logic. Still, how am I supposed to dislike someone when I don't? It doesn't work that way. Our hearts don't do what we tell 'em to."

"……!"

Oliver couldn't argue with *that*. If human emotions could be overruled with logic, life would be far simpler. He himself was constantly struggling with urges that went against his goals and the turmoil that accompanied his every decision. And he likely would for the rest of his life.

"…Would you choose her over us, Guy?" Katie asked, sounding anxious. She knew it was wrong to force a choice. Well aware it was a selfish question, she'd chosen to ask it anyway. That was Katie's way of caring for her friends. She wanted to keep Guy close—something she alone was capable of voicing honestly.

Guy made a face and patted her on the head. His way of returning the affection.

"Don't be silly. I didn't say *that*. I'm just not gonna start hating her because she's a curse bearer, that's all. Don't worry, she's not exactly wrapping me around her finger here. Got that, Pete?"

"Wh-why are you dragging me into this? I was *never* worried!"

Guy turned away from Katie, putting his arm over Pete's shoulders. The bespectacled boy tried shaking him off but to no avail.

"Plus, if we're talking types, I go for healthier complexions! Get some color in the cheeks, y'know? Just like veggies, a bit of awkwardness doesn't matter if they've grown up strong and taste good. That's the kinda girl I wanna marry."

"Hmm. Like that first-year girl?"

"Rita? Dude, she's younger."

"Oh? Is that a turnoff?" Chela asked.

"I guess not really, but where I grew up, big-sis types rule the roost, so I sorta got it in my head that's what a farmer's bride should be. Gimme a shy younger girl, and it just doesn't feel right. I mean, kid sisters are cute and all—just like this one. There, there."

"Don't rub my head! I'm not your kid sister! *And* I'm a boy today!"

His hair thoroughly mussed, Pete finally managed to squirm away. Everyone laughed, but just as Oliver was letting himself relax…

A new voice chimed in. "Oh, we talkin' naughty stuff? Lemme get in on that!"

A girl sidled up next to Pete, talking like she belonged there. They knew she was in their year, but not one of them had ever spoken to her before. The bespectacled boy shifted away, baffled.

"Wh-who are you? Why would you just jump into—?"

"Aw, don't be such a stinker, Mr. Reston. I've been aching to talk to you! And I at least wanna get you to remember my name. Mind if I sit with you?"

She whipped out her white wand and, with a quick pull spell, dragged a chair in from the next table. Oliver opened his mouth to say something, but yet another voice came from over his shoulder.

"If that's where this discussion's going, I gotta ask—what's your type, Ms. Hibiya? You like 'em ripped? Slim?"

This equally unfamiliar boy was looming over Oliver and talking directly to Nanao. The Azian girl stopped eating, her head tilting to one side.

"You mean my taste in men? …Mm, I have not spared it much thought. Pray give me some time to consider the subject."

“Don’t bother, Nanao,” Oliver said. Then he turned to the newcomers. “I’m not saying you two can’t join the conversation, but you really ought to save those questions for someone you know a little better. You can hardly blame us for finding your approach rude.”

The male newcomer leaned his hand onto the table in front of Oliver. “So uptight! You can’t just ice us out, Mr. Horn. I get not wanting to have the love of your life snatched away, but Ms. Hibiya doesn’t belong to you. Everyone’s got a shot!”

“That wasn’t my point. I’m talking about your manners.”

“And you’re barely disguising how possessive you are,” the girl sneered. “Quit pretending like you’re the only selfless soul here, Mr. Horn.”

Oliver’s brows snapped together. Sensing the tension rising, Chela began, “I think that’s about enough—”

“Getting a bit carried away ’ere, no?”

A third new voice—but this one instantly recognizable. A tall boy with a breezy smile stood at the end of the table.

“Mr. Rossi…?” Oliver said, blinking up at him.

“’ello, Oliver. I did not intend to intrude, but I cannot ’old my tongue. Their efforts, they are just so clumsy, no?”

Rossi shook his head dramatically before eyeing the two intruders.

“You want something that belongs to another, you ’ave to follow some rules. Barge in without paying your respects, and it will not only be Oliver you upset.”

They were both frowning, but Rossi merely chuckled.

“But where I just ’ad to laugh—everyone’s got a shot, was it? Ha-ha-ha! What a joke! Nothing could be further from the truth. Neither of you ’ave ever faced one of these six for real, ’ave you?”

“……!”

“……”

“Did you take part in the battle royal? Please, I am all ears. What were you doing then? Did you ’ave a tummy ache that kept you on the sidelines? Ach, you poor things.”

His voice dripped with sarcasm, and the two students’ faces grew tense—then Rossi’s tone suddenly got serious.

“Looks like you ’ave no right to put on such airs. You ’ave no right to speak to Oliver, Nanao, or their friends.”

“…Who do you think you are?”

“They kicked your ass, didn’t they?”

“That they did! I lost my battle—but at least I showed up to *fight*.”

Rossi looked quite proud of that. Not a trace of shame.

“Yet, the two of you did not even dare to lose. If that bothers you, then ’ow about you begin by proving you ’ave even an ounce of guts, eh?”

His fingers brushed the hilt of his athame. Seeing both rattled by the challenge, he went for the throat.

“Ah, one last thing. I say this out of pure good will: You ’ave eyes only for what lies in front of you, but spare a glance behind. Do you even realize who else is glaring at you?”

The pair jolted and scanned the room. Most people in the vicinity were just curious, but there were piercing stares coming from all directions.

Richard Andrews was elegantly stirring a cup of tea. Stacy Cornwallis and Fay Willock were sharing a fruit tart. Joseph Albright was devouring a

pie with the ferocity of a carnivore. Yet, all eight eyes were trained on the interlopers, the same thought in every mind: *Who do you think you are?*

"…Eep…!"

"L-later—!"

Both turned and fled the Fellowship like frightened rabbits. Oliver watched them go, then sighed.

"I wasn't sure how to handle that. Thanks, Mr. Rossi." He turned to the room at large. "Thanks, everyone."

But the four people he was addressing had turned their attention back to their meals, acting like nothing had happened. Shrugging, Oliver faced Rossi again.

"The pleasure was all mine," Rossi replied. "But you let your guard down!" He leaned in close, gaze fierce. "Their behavior? Inappropriate, yes. But you left yourself far too open. If she matters to you, shore up your defenses. None of us are children 'ere."

"Urgh…"

"Else…Nanao, your 'and?"

"Hmm? Like so?"

Unsure what he meant, Nanao held out her hand. With a flourish, Rossi took it and smoothly planted his lips on the back.

"Ah—!"

"Whoa!"

Pete and Katie both yelped.

Oliver went stiff with shock, and Rossi shot him a sly smile.

"Let your guard down, and she will be stolen away, like so. The risk is clear, yes?"

Oliver shot up, knocking his chair over. "Rossi!"

"The smolder becomes a fire! Ha-ha-ha! Ciao!"

Rossi spun around and ran off, laughing. Oliver glared after him but elected not to give chase. When he sat back down, he saw the Azian girl's mouth still wide open.

"Nanao, give me your hand! Now!"

"Huh? Again?"

Bewildered, she held out her freshly kissed hand. Oliver grabbed it, pulled out a potion-soaked handkerchief, and began wiping the back of her hand. He was so focused on this task that he failed to notice Guy stifling a laugh.

"…Bit of an overreaction there, man. It's just a kiss on the hand."

"And that could be a step in a Charm ritual! You can never be too careful!"

"I doubt Mr. Rossi would stoop to those means, but if it makes you feel better…," said Chela.

"…You won't kiss anyone yourself, but you don't want anyone else doing it, huh?"

Katie was staring daggers at Oliver, but he was in no state to notice. As an uncomfortable silence settled, Chela put a hand to her chin.

“But if issues like this are arising, then perhaps it’s time to admit we’re of age… Oliver, we may need to adjust our attitudes accordingly.”

He nodded several times. Without once pausing his vigorous wiping.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing,” he answered. “Let’s meet on it tonight. Anyone got plans they can’t get out of?”

“Oliver, ’tis starting to sting…”

Only when Nanao spoke up did he finally move the handkerchief from her hand. He gave her a look so earnest that the others could barely keep from laughing.

“If not, then let’s assemble at our secret base at eight tonight. This one’s important.”

And at eight that night, all six members gathered in their shared workshop on the labyrinth’s first layer.

“One, two, three… This is the eighth meeting of the Sword Roses,” said Katie.

“Getting pretty regular, then. And we’ve got lemon meringue pie today,” added Guy.

He’d come in early to bake, so the dessert was fresh out of the oven. Nanao looked delighted and was already reaching for it; Katie was right behind, scowling—it was usually her or Guy who provided refreshments, and they were getting pretty competitive.

Once everyone had a slice of pie in front of them, Oliver’s eyes met Chela’s, and they nodded.

“I’m glad you all came,” he said. “Let’s get right to business.”

He drew his white wand and used the tip of it to draw letters in light—two words, *male* and *female*.

“Time for sex ed,” he said, dead serious.

Katie and Guy both choked on their pie.

“*Cough, cough*… Wh-what is this?! Your idea of a joke?!”

“Not in the least,” Chela chimed in. “That is the sole purpose of this gathering.”

She waited for that to sink in.

“You do remember what happened at lunch, yes? Mr. Rossi’s timely intervention safely drove those two away—”

“Ahem!”

Chela caught Oliver’s glare and rolled her eyes at him.

“…Well, there was also the incident with his lips winding up on Nanao’s hand, but let’s put that aside for now.”

She turned to face two of her friends in particular.

“Pete, Nanao, do you know *why* those students were after you?”

“…Not a lot of reversi around, right? Can’t think of any other reason.”

“I’m at a complete loss myself. It did not seem as if he wished to duel.”

They looked equally baffled. Albright had learned of Pete's trait during the Ophelia incident, and near the end of the year, Pete had gone public with it. He'd had to think about that decision long and hard, but he concluded that the attention it brought him was less stressful than trying to hide it.

Chela sighed softly—their reactions were as clueless as she'd feared.

"I rather thought as much. Then let me not mince words."

She looked them dead in the eye.

"Those students want to make babies with you."

There was a long silence. A good thirty seconds passed before anyone said another word.

"……Huh?"

"Mmmm?"

Pete and Nanao just looked lost. Neither processed Chela's statement at all.

Chela nodded. "Makes no sense? Then allow me to break things down for you both: For nearly all mages, establishing a long-standing lineage is an obligation of the highest imperative. Equally important is incorporating superior lineage into their own. The greater a mage's talent, the more sought-after they'll be. Are you with me so far?"

Looking a little rattled, all four nodded. Oliver listened closely, leaving the main teaching role to Chela.

"Meanwhile, mages from superior bloodlines do not readily expand their lineage. This is to avoid disclosing the secrets fostered within their line. Some clans have carried that too far, resorting to inbreeding in an attempt to prevent diffusion of their bloodline.

"For these reasons, a mage from a prestigious family cannot easily have a child. Their partner must be from a connected line or possess a superlative power that is deemed worth the deficiencies. Given those terms, the feelings of the parties involved are *not* considered paramount."

Nobody here knew more about these mage customs than Chela. Heir to a very prestigious family, she'd had the importance of protecting her blood drilled into her from an early age. It was the greatest treasure she possessed.

"So what are mages to do who are not part of a superior bloodline and do not have outstanding abilities? The most commonplace approach is to have a child with someone of similar abilities and lineage. But alternately—you can go after one of the scarce few mages of no lineage who nonetheless possess remarkable talents."

Chela turned directly to today's targets.

"Pete, Nanao—that describes both of you."

This pronouncement made Pete turn bright red.

"W-wait…I get how that applies to Nanao. But me?! I haven't even *done* anything yet!"

“Regardless of your personal accomplishments, the reversi trait alone *is* highly valuable. It’s known to be genetic, although inheritance is rare. In other words, if a mage reproduces with you, there’s a chance their descendants will have more reversi down the line. To many families, that is highly desirable.”

“And for the same reasons Chela just explained, reversi bloodlines are often carefully guarded to keep the trait from spreading. The great sage Rod Farquois was known for his many amorous exploits, yet he left surprisingly few children behind,” Oliver added. “But you, Pete—you’re a first-generation reversi from a nonmagical family. You reside in no house and have no one guarding you. You may well be the only mage in the world in that position.”

“Er…oh…”

“I thought we talked about this when you were deciding to go public, but…judging from your reaction, I didn’t make myself clear. Sorry if I’ve made this worse.”

Pete hastily shook his head. “No, it’s not your fault. I…just didn’t realize. Until it actually happened, it never felt real to me that anyone would…look at me that way. Especially while I’m still only in my second year. I know you said I’d be mobbed when I got older, but…”

He frowned, groaning. He’d grown up in an ordinary household, and the idea that a single trait could completely change how people saw him still felt foreign. There was a big gap between his self-image and how others perceived him.

Chela shifted gears.

“And you, Nanao. Your Innocent Color is clear evidence of your high aptitude for magic. Starting with the defeat of the garuda, you spent last year proving your abilities time and time again. I imagine there are few students at Kimberly who *aren’t* watching your every move.”

Then she added: “Do you both understand, now? Why other students would want to have children with you?”

Pete and Nanao gave this some thought.

“Additionally,” Oliver said, “despite your talents, both of you still know little about the magical world. Other students will see that as a weakness and target you. And some of them will take the direct approach, like today.”

He frowned, remembering the pair from lunch. Chela nodded in agreement.

“You’ll need to be mindful of your positions and learn what a typical teenage mage considers the ‘correct’ attitude toward love and sex. That’s the purpose of today’s meeting. I know it may all come as quite a shock, but there’s no time like the present. After all, according to the school rules, third-year students are officially allowed to get pregnant and give birth.”

“P-preg…”

That word left Pete mentally and emotionally overwhelmed. Katie had turned every bit as red as him. “I’ve…definitely seen a few upperclassmen who were *clearly*, um…”

“Exactly,” said Oliver. “Kimberly provides many amenities to assist with and encourage student pregnancy and childbirth. Having children during your time here is perfectly commonplace. Which is exactly why we felt we should have this talk now, while that’s still a year away.”

“……”

“Guy, don’t hide your face,” Chela snapped. “This is reality. It applies to you, too.”

Even the tall boy had his face buried in his hands, completely speechless. Chela wasn’t letting him off that easy.

“For reference, I’ve got the stats right here. Data on how many Kimberly students engage in sexual intercourse before graduation—eighty percent.”

“Eigh—”

“E-eighty?!”

Guy and Katie both gaped at her. They’d seen gossip columns in the school papers, but none of them had provided such specific figures. Most students must’ve taken that as a given, nothing to write an entire article about.

“This figure has not changed in recent years. In other words, it is likely that four or five of us will have a sexual encounter before our time here is done. Perhaps with someone we have not yet met…or perhaps with someone seated at this very table.”

“Huh—?” Katie’s eyes darted to each of the boys in turn. Her gaze was drawn to Oliver first, but sensing he was about to meet it, she felt overcome with mortal shame and quickly looked away. As for where her gaze ended up…

“…Nope, nope, not happening.”

Her eyes met the tall boy’s by accident, but he waved both hands, wincing like he’d just heard a horrible joke.

Katie smiled like an executioner to a pitiable prisoner. “Marco, put Guy somewhere *really* high up.”

“Mm, okay.”

A giant arm reached through the open door from the next room and grabbed Guy bodily. Only then did he realize his blunder.

“W-wait! Sorry, that was my bad! It just caught me off guard, and I let the truth slip ouuuuuuuut!”

Begging for his life, Guy was dragged into the other room. His yelling continued for a while. The larger room’s ceiling was a good ten yards high—and was frequently used to punish him. Basking in the sounds of his screams, Katie turned back to her friends.

“Enough about that boor. Shall we continue?”

Her smile alone culled any desire they had to argue in favor of clemency. The other four friends offered Guy a silent apology and pretended not to hear his shrieks.

“Now that you two have a grasp of the situation, let’s get down to brass tacks,” Oliver said. “First, always have contraceptives on hand. That’s just a given. It may sound like an exaggeration now, but when the moment arrives, you might not get any warning. And if you’re caught unprepared… well, assume that’s the worst-case scenario.

“More than anything, I want you all to bear this in mind: Don’t get caught up in a momentary rush of feelings. Once you’re calm and thinking clearly, make sure to ask yourself again and again if the person’s really worth it. If you aren’t completely certain, then no matter who it is or how they’re propositioning you, refuse. No need to feel guilty about it. Anyone who doesn’t give you time to think is not respecting you.”

He held their gaze, speaking firmly.

Chela nodded and added a few thoughts of her own.

“I mostly agree with Oliver there…but I will add that different people may have different ideas of what’s ‘right.’ I should warn you that there’s a fairly common belief at Kimberly that you should at least sleep with *someone* before your fourth year. This is considered helpful advice for students who plan to have a child during their studies here; many problems can arise on your first time, so having some experience before the real deal is considered beneficial. And while I don’t endorse the tactic, be aware that others may weaponize their own ephemeral allure in the hopes of landing a ‘one-night mistake,’ if you will. They may see that as their one and only chance.”

“I’d rather you guys not try that yourselves and not fall prey to it, either. Naturally, I’m just speaking as a friend here and can’t force you to do anything, of course.”

He stifled his frustrations. Ultimately, gathering them here and warning them might not accomplish anything. Whether to follow this advice or ignore it was at their discretion. Anywhere else, a sense of ethics might put the brakes on any unseemly activity, but they were little more than empty platitudes in the hellscape of Kimberly. Gambling on a one-night mistake, too, was merely one of many viable choices here.

“…Oliver,” Nanao said, breaking her long silence.

He turned toward her. “Yes, Nanao?”

“Hypothetically speaking, would you want to conceive a child with me?”

A single question turned the room to ice. Everyone but Nanao became frozen to the spot, the only sound the distant echo of Guy’s screams.

Chela recovered first and coughed. “…Nanao, that’s quite a leap.”

“I am aware. But this is uncharted territory for me. I have been swinging a blade on the battlefield for as long as I can remember and thus had no inkling of anyone harboring such desires for me. *Affection* and *love* are merely pleasant-sounding words to my ears.”

With the motivations behind her question clear, her frozen comrades relaxed. Oliver was still extremely rattled, but Nanao wasn't letting him get away without an answer.

"So I beseech you, Oliver. Is this truly a matter that concerns me? Me, a savage girl who is good for naught but battle—do I possess such value? I ask this of none but yourself, the most forthright of all I have met in this place of learning."

"＿ !"

Those eyes of hers bore into him, and Oliver knew…there was no escaping this question.

Yet, he was at a loss. How could he possibly answer this?

He would rather bite his tongue than answer in the negative. That would be as bad as Guy's failure earlier, and it would go against the purpose of this gathering—to impress Nanao's own appeal upon her. Nor did it agree with his own evaluation. Told to wax poetic on the appeal of Nanao Hibiya, he could undoubtedly speak all night.

But if he answered in the affirmative—that would make him no better than the lunchtime intruders. He didn't want that. Regardless of how typical mages thought, he refused to be like them. He didn't want his relationship with Nanao to be reduced to reproduction and inheritance. That—that would be too—

"It's the personality that defines us, Noll. Not talent or blood. Remember that."

The one thing he'd sworn to inherit, whatever his shortcomings as a son.

"……I'll admit…"

His voice shook. But he couldn't say nothing. He had to answer.

"……I do feel—an attraction."

He could barely force that out. Once spoken, it felt…plain. The bare minimum affirmative response. How much easier would it have been if he could have just treated it like an empty compliment? That was impossible. Especially when she was demanding that he be forthright.

"You do? …Ah. You do." Nanao seemed to be mulling that over.

"I think we're all getting a bit too close for comfort," Chela cut in, as if trying to soothe them both. "Everyone is now aware of the issue at hand, which is success enough for one day. Let's put an end to this discussion for now."

"……Yeah," Katie agreed, looking anxiously from Oliver to Nanao.

Chela gently stroked her hair. "And, Katie…it's high time you forgave Guy."

"He gets ten more minutes," Katie snapped. She did not shave a second off that time.

The group talked for a while longer, then called it a night.

"＿＿ "

"……"

Two AM, in the girls' dorm. Nanao and Katie's room. Both long since in bed, with the lights out.

"……Nanao…are you, um, doing all right?"

"Hmm?"

Lying on her side, Katie had been well aware her roommate was still awake. The Azian girl's breathing made it clear she wasn't sleeping.

"You haven't said a word since we got back, so I thought maybe you were hung up on something… I mean, today was pretty shocking, right? Must've been your first time hearing a lot of that."

Katie was picking her words carefully. There was a noticeable pause before Nanao replied.

"I suppose it did…rattle me. I never imagined I would be desired for anything but my skills in combat… 'Twas a bolt from the blue. Caught me with my defenses down."

"…But it was obvious to the rest of us. You've always been as cute as you are cool. And—"

Katie closed her eyes, picturing everything the Azian girl had done. They were barely at the start of their second year, and she'd already lost count of Nanao's feats. Stopping Marco's rampage on their first day, the garuda attacking the kobold hunt—Nanao had been at the fore of it all.

"—every time I see you fight, I'm struck by your beauty. Girl or boy, everyone stops to stare, captivated. And not for weird or inappropriate reasons."

"You're rather making me squirm, Katie."

Maybe the atmosphere of the meeting still lingered, or she was emboldened by the darkness. Tonight, Katie could say things she'd never dared say before. And that sensation gave her the push she needed—to take the next step.

"Well, since we're already squirming, I might as well ask… Do you love Oliver?"

The silence was palpable. Nanao almost never hesitated, so this felt extra significant.

"I've been pondering exactly that all this while," she said after some thought.

Katie had been well aware of that, of course. She'd known what occupied her friend's mind the entire evening.

"I feel an urge to hear his voice. To be by his side. To touch and hold him. I have no doubts about any of that. Which is why I've stuck to him like a burr since we met."

"……!"

That sure sounded like a confirmation to Katie's ears. A pain shot through her chest. All this time she'd avoided asking because she'd *known* how Nanao would respond. Nanao wasn't the type to dodge the question or play dumb; Katie, meanwhile, was the one struggling with this answer.

“At the same time, I have a doubt—and a fundamental one,” the Azian girl continued. “If you truly love someone, can that emotion coexist with an urge to see them dead?”

Katie had expected the first answer—but not this. Unsettled, she peered through the darkness, trying to see her roommate’s face.

“Dead? You want— Wh-what does *that* mean…?” she managed.

Yet again, Nanao did not mince words. “What I desire most from Oliver is a duel to the death. Since the first time we crossed blades in class, until this very moment—that desire alone has never once wavered.”

The steel in her voice made Katie gulp. They’d talked about this once shortly after said match—and she’d never brought it up again. Katie had assumed there was no need. Nanao was always so bright and cheerful; she’d been sure this concern had been long since cleared away. Or at least—she’d tried to convince herself that was true.

“I had hoped that this urge would fade as I spent time with you all. Alas, that was optimistic. The greater my affection for Oliver grows, the more I get to know him, the stronger my desire to cross blades with him. ’Tis like a fever taken hold. My body quivers with an insatiable hunger.”

She gave voice to the desire she’d kept hidden—and her words echoed true. The urges Nanao had confessed to back then did not have roots so shallow that time alone could resolve them. They were woven into the very fabric of her character—their tendrils reaching her soul.

“Each time I query what lies within, the answer comes back like the toll of a bell. I wish nothing more than to sink my blade into his body—or feel his blade sink into mine. I replay our brief exchange of blows with the passion of madness. If I could see what lies beyond that exchange, what greater joy would there be…?”

Nanao spoke with palpable heat. Yet, her words sent shivers down Katie’s spine. She’d thought her friend was an open book, with nothing to hide. But all along, this obsession had lurked beneath. She felt as if she were glimpsing the flames of a heat beyond imagining. Like peering at a raging inferno through a pane of glass.

“What do you make of it, Katie? Hearing this—would you still say I ‘love’ Oliver?”

The inferno was looking back at her. Nanao Hibiya sought her friend’s opinion. Katie was in no state to answer. Her throat, her tongue, her lips—they had all gone numb. There was a note of desperation to the query—any answer would be tantamount to an affirmation or refutation of Nanao’s entire being. Katie had never once been asked anything so significant.

There was a leaden silence. A pregnant pause. The gulf between them was like a raging river that marked the boundary between two countries. And in time, Nanao took *that* as her answer. Even in the darkness, Katie could tell she took it hard.

“Perhaps not. I suspected as much… Pardon my foolishness.”

“ — Ah—”

Katie let out a strangled gasp—feeling as if she'd made a mistake she could never take back.

Yet, still she remained paralyzed, unable to move so much as a finger. Across from her, Nanao slowly sat up in bed, bolt upright on her knees, legs folded under her. A hint of moonlight filtered through the curtains, catching her profile in stark relief. Her expression was cold and remote, like a samurai about to slice her belly open—yet so beautiful it took Katie's breath away.

"I have long been aware. With his consent acquired, then perhaps my urge to slay him would be quelled—but when he harbors no such desire to cross blades, that urge is a beast lurking within the shallows of my conscience. Unfitting the pride a warrior should bear. Far from it—this is the basest of impulses.

"Yet…awareness has done me no good. I have been a fool, allowing myself to dream. Of a day when he responds in kind. Of a day when I can take him on, not as a beast, but as a warrior should."

What she spoke of could never be. To even imagine such a thing was a sin beyond all pardons. How was the shape of her fancy so removed from human morality?

"If…perchance, I can no longer be satisfied with dreams. If I forget my very pride and am reduced to the beast within…"

The words would not stop beating down on her. Nanao was now begging her friend to fulfill a last request.

"If that happens, Katie…I implore you not to hesitate. Let it be your athame that casts a spell—and pierces my heart."

Hearing this hit Katie hard, as if it was *her* heart that had been pierced. A vivid vision rose up in her mind's eye.

A dreary, unknown place. A shadow before her, bloodstained katana in hand. Innumerable corpses slain by that same blade. The piles of bodies silent, the silence so oppressive it made her ears ring.

And yet, no matter how many the shadow struck down, her hunger was never satiated. All this creature sought was a single boy—the one she had deemed her destiny. Until her blade crossed his, until she felled the one she loved most—her advance would never falter.

And in face of that spectacle, the curly-haired girl drew her athame with shaking hands. The time for words had long since passed—the task she must perform all too clear. As her former friend had once urged, she had come to play her part. She was here to fire a spell through this creature's heart.

She knew nothing could or should be said, yet—oh, yet her lips moved on their own. Her opponent might be transformed beyond all measure, but Katie's feelings had not changed at all.

"…Nanao…!"

Spurred by this vision, the real Katie's body flew out from beneath her sheets. Calling her friend's name, she leaped onto the opposite bed,

wrapping her arms around Nanao. Holding her tight, holding her back from that fate.

She knew. Katie was as sure as she'd ever been. What she'd just seen… was Nanao Hibiya *consumed by the spell*.

"Enjoy not the sword of vengeance but the sword of mutual love," Nanao said, feeling her friend's trembling, the heat of her embrace.

"My one solace through countless battles, the words my father bestowed unto me—now feel like a curse."

The old Nanao could never have imagined any of this. She lived in battle and would die in kind—she'd been certain that was all life held. The manner of her death was all she need consider. Kill or be killed—with no trace of reluctance.

But no more. Strange twists of fate had led her to this school across the sea—and given her a life *beyond* war. She'd formed ties with friends who wished only for her to live. She was grateful for it—yet her gravest sin was the state of her own heart, unchanged despite all that.

"…Nothing is set in stone. Not yet. *Nothing.*"

Katie's words resisted the Azian girl's resignation. The future she'd glimpsed had not yet come to pass.

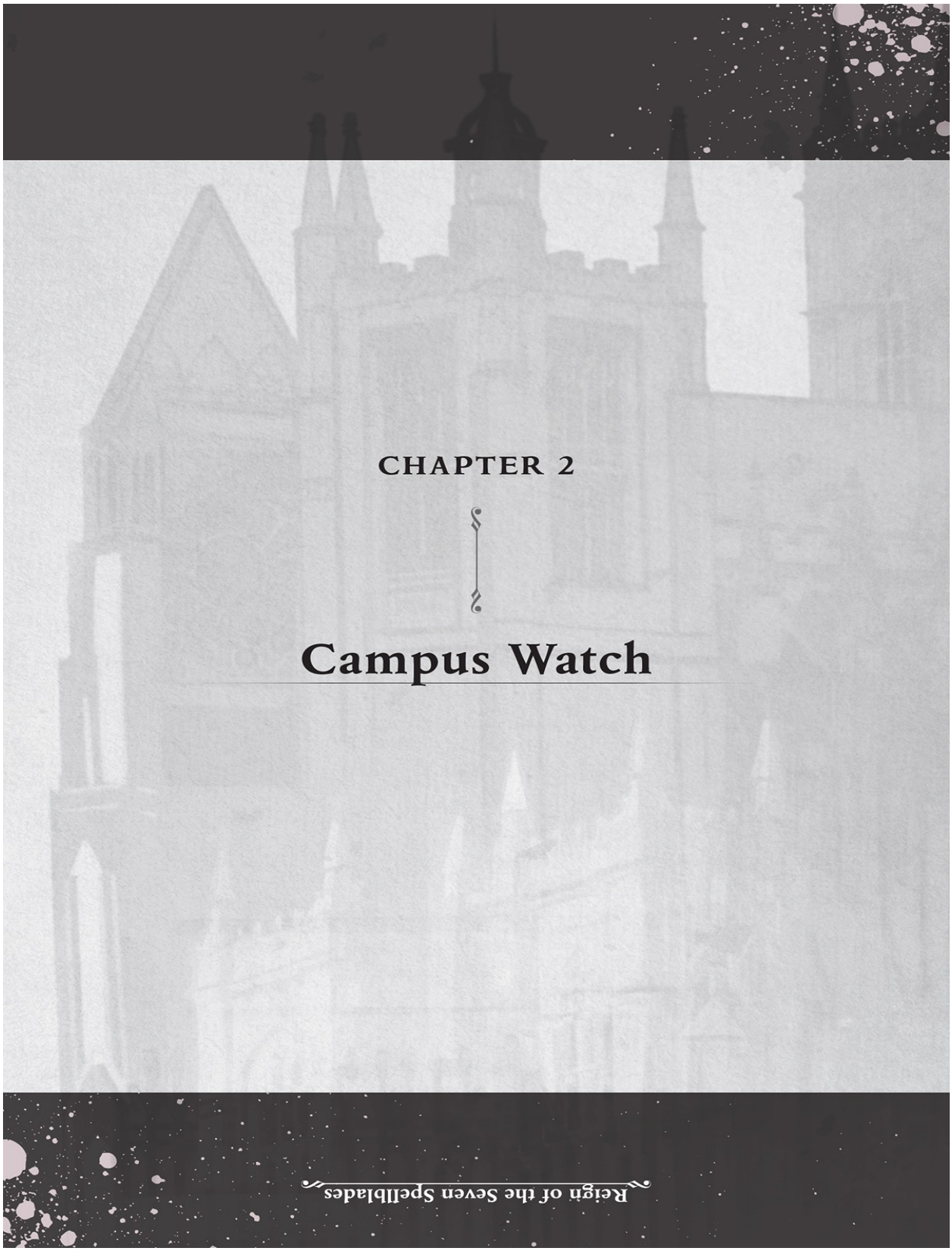
"We're only second-years. Our lives here have just started… We're going to have so much fun. There's so many things left to see. Our brooms can take us anywhere. We can play all we like. We're all gonna be together, laughing our heads off. Right…?"

So she gave voice to hope. With strength and verve. As if trying to paint over that potential future.

"And all that time we spend together will drive that thought from your mind. You won't want to fight Oliver to the death anymore… You'll find you'd rather stay close to all of us," Katie insisted. "And one day we'll remember this, and all of us'll make fun of you for it… We'll be like, 'Remember that stuff you used to say? None of that even happened. And you were so serious about it, too! We'll always be together—always—!'"

By the end of it, her voice was choked with tears. Nanao put her hands around her friend's back with the faintest of nods.

"Let us hope," she said. "I would like nothing more."



CHAPTER 2

Campus Watch

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The capacity for flight is one of the most significant things differentiating mages from ordinary folk.

The magical creature of the genus Besom, subfamily Scopae—otherwise known as a "broom"—was discovered before recorded history, and the practice of broomriding is far more storied than that of sword arts. Nonmagical folk have a saying—"Even witches fall off their brooms"—which exemplifies that.

Naturally, midflight falls do happen. And yet—*because* flight is possible, it is equally natural that some will wish to compete for sheer speed. Here you add in the extremely mage-like idea that healing spells can take care of most injuries, and you get not just broom racing but games involving knocking each other off brooms. The thrills and savagery quickly captivated the hearts of mages everywhere.

What started as a game soon gained standardized rules and became a codified sport nearly a thousand years ago. The game evolved—eight hundred years ago, it became a team sport. "Brutal, yet beautiful" was the motto even then, used throughout the Union.

And today, many mages spend their weekends at broomsport games, a pint of ale in one hand.

"Fast! Fast! Fast! Fast beyond compaaaare! She's still only in her second year! How can Nanao Hibiya fly like that? She's too good for the field! Everyone else is eating her dust!"

Mages clad in two types of uniforms wheeled through the sky over packed stands. Darting in from the fore, closing in from behind, pincering from either side—and using the clubs on their backs to knock their opponents to the ground. Each player's fall made the crowd roar. And in the thick of it was a girl, clearly the smallest person in the air.

"Speed alone makes her a force to be reckoned with, but if you put a club in her hands, she's truly unstoppable! How is this possible? Is every samurai in Azia this good?! That could well spell doom for our Union! Audience, better perform your ablutions and get ready for some hara-kiri!"

The student commentary clearly wasn't calming down any time soon. This wasn't exactly your ordinary game. One team had a single player completely controlling the flow of the match. Using maneuvers unheard of in the junior league, she was flying circles around everyone else. The other team was trying every trick in the book to fight back.

"Whoaaa! Her opponents are throwing caution to the wind and all attacking at once! Hibiya's got eight players on her tail! Very unsporting

but entirely understandable! Can she handle it? Or will this prove too much for her?”

This was their last-ditch effort. Players surrounding her above and below, right and left, just pushing in from all sides. Well aware her teammates would be hot on their heels, they thought only of taking down the ace. Hardly the best tactic, but nothing else would make this a contest. They could not afford to let her fly. No words exchanged, but all on the same page—they each hit their target together—and all eight clubs caught air. Not a single one of them even managed to scratch her.

“Ohhhhhhhh! She did it! She got out of that cluster with a move I didn’t even understand! What *was* that?! How did she find that gap?! That’s it, I’m done commentating! All I wanna do is watch you fly! Please, Hibiya! May your delights never ceaaaase!”

The commentator was screaming now, but the crowd was roaring just as loud. Ale sloshed from cups onto the row before, but everyone here was past caring. All eyes were skyward, fixed on the girl flitting through the air high above.

“…No matter how many times she does it, I still can’t believe my eyes,” Chela whispered. “Nanao’s broomsport techniques are just *that* overpowering.”

They were watching from a corner of the stands. The entire crowd was on their feet; not a soul dared to sit.

“The junior league here is for first- through third-years,” Guy said, standing next to her. “But she’s got no competition left, huh? She’s played six matches but is averaging an astonishing 5.8—which means she’s single-handedly downing half the other side every time. How can they not win a match that one-sided? No way the Wild Geese don’t come in first this season.”

“…Nanao’s a real balance breaker,” Pete added. “She’s way out of everyone’s league. Look at the opponent’s cheer squad. They’re past frustrated; at this point, they’ve basically acquiesced.”

He pointed at the stands opposite. The other three looked—and found the cheer squad standing stock-still, not even waving their flags. No one could accuse them of slacking off, either; in a match this one-sided, the supporters often tapped out long before the players.

“It’s such a problem that management’s considering pulling her out of the juniors,” Guy said with a laugh. “Only two other players in history have made their debut as second-years and been promoted to the senior league that same year.”

“……”

Katie was listening to all of this but watching in silence, her expression much grimmer than the others.

How ironic, she thought. She’s a blinding light, and everyone wants her—but nothing quenches her thirst. I know that now.

“Whoaaaaaaa! …Uh—h-huh?”

Nanao had knocked a player off his broom, but just before he hit the turf, he bobbed for a moment, then was set gently on the ground. The catcher nearby called out, eyes never leaving the sky.

“If anything hurts, stay put. The medic team is on their way.”

It was Oliver Horn, white wand in hand, ready to act at a moment’s notice. He was but one of the catchers monitoring the watch above, but his skills had caught the attention of the commentator.

“Whoa, nice catch by Oliver Horn! Hibiya’s very own minder! With a player who flies like she does, you need a solid-gold catcher down below! Delicate magic control that gives every plummeter a feather-soft landing—they love him! He may be going for this season’s catcher MVP! Wooo! You can catch me any tiiiime, Oliver!”

Wincing at this excessive praise, Oliver stuck to his role. There was never a second’s respite. He knew full well she could down another player at any moment.

“This commentator gets it!” Chela said, delighted. “Oliver is absolutely deserving of that praise!”

“Agreed,” Pete replied softly.

Guy looked from their friend in the sky to their friend on the ground. “I mean, Nanao herself has yet to fall…”

“Yes, but even if she doesn’t require his services, having her own catcher there makes all the difference. She *knows* he’ll catch her if she falls—and that trust enables her to fly without fear. A solid chunk of Nanao’s performance is *because* she has Oliver with her. I have no doubt about that.”

Chela sure sounded convincing—but even as she spoke, the blare of horns signaled the end of the match. Not because the clock ran out—but because Nanao’s team had knocked out all their opponents. As the victors formed a circle in the air, Guy turned to the others.

“That’s a wrap. Should we go congratulate ’em? …Katie, you’re being awful quiet. You okay there?”

“…Mm, I’m fine. Just…got something on my mind. C’mon, let’s go celebrate!”

Katie was all smiles again as she headed out. There was no use in her acting all gloom and doom. If she wanted to guide her friend toward brighter pastures, she had to be a light.

“Great work, Nanao! You were simply fabulous, as always!”

Nanao was in her team’s room, getting showered with praise from all directions. An older female teammate had her arms around her, and the others were coming over, one after another.

“Seriously, you were awesome! I saw you escape that eight-man net! They couldn’t believe their eyes!”

“Damn, though, leave some for us! I didn’t drop anyone today!”

Mingled with the praise was *some* mild grumbling.

As Oliver watched from the corner, another older player clapped him on the shoulder.

“You did good work, too, Oliver. Chin up. That commentator doesn’t rave about second-years often.”

“…Sure, but I think at least half of that was lip service.”

He’d done his job as catcher, but that was hardly comparable to the spectacle Nanao had put on. Her broomriding talent was leagues above his own skills—and each new match drove that fact home.

“Is Nanao Hibiya here?”

The team room door opened, and an older girl came in. Eyes like daggers, she moved like a panther. As the team’s collective gaze turned toward her, she found the Azian girl among them.

“I figure you’ve heard the rumors, but this is your formal notice,” the newcomer said curtly. “Next match, you’re moving up to the senior leagues. Rejoice.”

A stir ran through the room—which soon gave way to cheers.

“Whoaaa, there it is!”

“I knew it’d happen before the season ended, but I didn’t think it’d be *this* fast!”

“Awww, this was our last match flying together!”

“Hey, don’t cry! You’ve just gotta get yourself to the senior leagues, too!”

Some were happy for her, others sad to be left behind—but the more worked up they got, the more the interloper got annoyed.

“…Shut it,” she snarled. “You realize a younger rookie just ditched your asses, right? And you’re *happy*? Gnats.”

Her comment was scathing enough it cast a pall over the room. The boy next to Oliver—a more senior broomsport player—stepped in.

“Harsh as ever, Ashbury… But I can’t agree with you there. A teammate moving up *should* be celebrated.”

“What, you think this is *your* doing? Don’t make me laugh.”

His attempt at deescalating just seemed to provoke Ashbury further.

“This match was all her, as was every result the Wild Geese have posted this season,” she snapped, glaring around the room. “Did this match have one second of ‘teamwork’ anywhere? I didn’t see any. That’s what happens when a swallow shares the skies with gnats.”

This beyond brutal evaluation shut everyone up. They were well aware the bulk of the day’s victory had been down to Nanao. Ashbury flicked her eyes away from them, turning to Oliver.

“If anyone else deserves credit, it’s your catcher there. You did far better work than any of these gnats.”

“…Thanks.”

Hardly seemed like the time to delight in a compliment, so Oliver stuck to the bare minimum acknowledgment. And Ashbury’s eyes were already back on Nanao.

“Either way, fun time’s over. Come to the sky where you belong, Nanao Hibiya. So I can knock you out of it.”

“Gladly. ’Twould be a privilege.” Nanao didn’t bat an eye at the threat—nor was she done speaking. Looking her challenger right in the eyes, she added, “But the word *gnat* applies to no one here. We have shared a sky, and they are my fellows. I demand an immediate retraction.”

“…Hmmm? What a tedious hill to die on.”

Ashbury dismissed her request out of hand. She stared at Nanao a few moments longer, as if taking measure of her, then spoke once more.

“Might as well ask while I’m here. This is critical, so think good and hard about your answer: What’s a broom to you?”

An awfully abstract question. Nanao looked baffled.

“My partner, naturally. We share a desire for greater and greater speed, and it will carry me to far-off skies. Is that not the case for you?”

She answered from the heart and then flipped the question, unable to conceive of any other stance. Ashbury’s position was equally firm.

“Not at all. Couldn’t be more different,” she replied. “A broom is my body. A part of me. It flies as I want it to and has no will of its own.”

She jabbed a finger over her shoulder at the broom on her back. Then she leaned in close, glaring into Nanao’s eyes at point-blank range.

“Glad I asked. You’re an eyesore, kid. And I’m gonna knock you outta the sky.”

Her voice was a low growl that carried this declaration of war into death-threat territory. Then she spun on her heel and strode out of the room. Not one of the players she’d insulted attempted to stop her. To junior league players, she was just far too intense to engage with.

No one dared speak until they were absolutely sure she was long gone.

“…You sure are a magnet for trouble, Nanao,” the oldest boy on the team said.

“That is one word for it, yes. She certainly seemed to have a severe disposition,” Nanao replied, seemingly more intrigued than anything else.

An older girl came up behind and put her hands on Nanao’s shoulders.

“That was Diana Ashbury, one of Kimberly’s best broomriders. If she’s got it in for you, that’s bad news, Nanao.”

Nanao aside, everyone in the room was on that page. Extraordinary talents drew extraordinary discontent. Oliver was once again forced to confront just how Nanao’s very being affected the world around her—and as he did, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse us! We’re friends with Nanao and Oliver. Can we come in?”

Both recognized Guy’s voice.

“Your friends are here to celebrate,” the girl behind Nanao said with a smile. “Go have fun, you two.”

“Verily! Come, Oliver!”

“Mm.”

They headed for the door, basking in the adulations of their friends, as if washing away the turbulence of moments prior.

It wasn’t just broomsports, either. Advancing a year had dramatically raised Nanao’s profile on campus. Her first year had been a whirlwind—the troll subjugation, garuda defeat, impressive showings in the first-year’s battle royal, and finally her involvement in the Ophelia Salvadori incident. Her feats spoke for themselves.

“Is this the place?”

“…Yep.”

Nanao and Oliver were outside a meeting room on the fourth floor. This was the student council office, but the sign on the door read CAMPUS WATCH HEADQUARTERS. An imposing name, but very Kimberly.

“Excuse us,” Oliver said, knocking. “Second-years, Oliver Horn and Nanao Hibiya. Answering your summons.”

“Come in,” a male voice responded.

They stepped through the door. Long tables were arranged in a square at the center, and three upperclassmen sat around it, with Godfrey in the middle.

"Welcome to the Kimberly Campus Watch," he said. "Sorry to spring this on you. No need to look so tense. Have a seat."

The student body president waved them to the chairs opposite. Once they were seated, Godfrey straightened up, speaking formally.

"First, allow me to express my gratitude for your assistance with Ophelia and Carlos. It's thanks to your sterling efforts that no one caught up in that died."

"…No, if you hadn't arrived when you did, we all would have," Oliver said, eyes on his hands. This was his honest opinion.

But this made the dark-skinned upperclassman frown—judging from the colors of her uniform, she was a sixth-year.

"And that's why you don't go places you can't handle," she snapped. "Godfrey only cares about results, but I don't let people off that easy."

Oliver had no arguments there. He simply nodded, knowing this was true. But the third upperclassman broke out laughing—a fifth-year male, on the small side. "…You're the *last* one to talk."

"You wanna say that *again*, Tim?"

"Nah, I'm good."

She fixed him with a glare, but Tim pointedly avoided meeting her eye.

"Then keep quiet, mad poisoner," she spat. "It's your fault we can all identify most poisons by the odor alone."

"And what a debt you owe me! Oh, such praise! I'm blushing."

He believed chutzpah was the best response to spite, and sparks were obviously flying. Stuck between them, Godfrey sighed—clearly, he'd long since given up mediating.

"Don't butt heads when we've got company," he said. "Sorry about my cohorts. They bicker a lot, but they're closer than they seem."

"That was the impression I received," Nanao replied with a smile.

Both Watch members broke off their staring contest, and Godfrey introduced them properly. The sixth-year girl was Lesedi Ingwe, and the fifth-year boy Tim Linton. Both were veteran Watch members and had fought by Godfrey's side since their first days at Kimberly. They'd actually met Oliver and Nanao before, after the Ophelia fracas, on the way back up from the labyrinth's third layer.

"Now, to business," Godfrey began. "I'm sure you've guessed why I called you here."

He leaned forward, looking at each visitor's eyes in turn.

"Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya—would you join the Campus Watch?"

Hearing this came as no surprise to Oliver. Godfrey had already done his duty and given them an empty reprimand for entering the labyrinth during an active alert. Recruitment was the only other reason they'd be summoned here.

“I’m sure that incident made it clear we’re constantly short-staffed. We have a good number of members, but they pale in comparison to the problems that arise on campus. Currently, we have no choice but to accept the fact that we simply can’t handle everything.”

He was not one to sugarcoat the Watch’s shortcomings. Oliver had known he was the plain-spoken type, and this candor only reinforced that.

“But don’t despair. It’s a long ways from implementation, but we have a clear plan to address this concern. We plan to regulate the labyrinth. Limit entry to third-years and above and increase watchful eyes to reduce student clashes. If we can get that implemented on the first two layers—well, it’s an estimate, but we believe it would eliminate roughly two-thirds of labyrinth incidents.”

The specifics he was giving helped Oliver figure out just how the current Kimberly Student Council operated. And the reason they didn’t call themselves by that name—they were fundamentally not in the school’s pocket. Their plan was a direct challenge to the status quo.

“I’m a mage myself. I’m aware that the pursuit of sorcery lies beyond the boundaries of morality, and if the residents of the depths choose to kill one another, I will not interfere. But I will not stand idly by when their conflicts involve inexperienced underclassmen. I’ve held firm to that position for some time.

“And there’s no shortage of students who think the same. As proof, the number of underclassmen in the annual death tolls has remained consistently low. Upperclassmen are doing what they can to prevent their juniors’ deaths. In other words, my intent to regulate the labyrinth is merely elevating an existing concept to a formal structure.”

Oliver nodded at this. In the short time since he’d matriculated, labyrinth problems had been both violent and bloody. His own involvement had been alternately bad luck and intentional meddling—but facing that many dangers in the first year was clearly unacceptable. His group had come far too close to sustaining permanent losses.

“Given that you two risked your lives to save a friend, I hoped you might sympathize. That’s one reason I’m inviting you to join—but not the only one. More practically speaking, we need people who fight. You know better than most how much skill it takes to face someone consumed by the spell. You’ve gotta be better than anyone around. And there aren’t many who qualify—yet you two are already showing promise.”

Godfrey paused, watching their faces closely.

“I appreciate the praise,” Oliver said. “But honestly, I think it’s undeserved. The only reason we survived long enough for you to get there was because Ms. Miligan was with us. We’d never have managed it on our own.”

“Miligan said the same—that she’d never have survived it on her own.”

Oliver blinked. He hadn’t seen that one coming. Vera Miligan’s assistance had been invaluable, and he had not felt they returned the favor.

“Naturally, I wouldn’t put you on our front lines just yet. But in your first year, you fought off countless chimeras, made it to the third layer, and returned alive with your friends from the Grand Aria. I don’t for a second believe that was a coincidence. In light of your potential for further growth, I don’t think I’m overestimating you at all.”

“……”

Between the evaluations of the president and Miligan, the upperclassman who’d escorted them through the labyrinth, further demurring would come across as rude. Oliver quit arguing and listened. Nanao had yet to respond.

“And of course, I have no intention of demanding one-sided labor. Given the nature of our Watch, we can’t expect any support or funding from the school itself, but there is plenty else we can offer you,” Godfrey went on. “For instance, the results of research conducted by Watch-affiliated students. Not *all* of it, but we are sharing portions of it among ourselves. There are other student groups with similar practices but few on the scale of the Campus Watch. The more contributors you have, the bigger the boons.”

Oliver certainly found that idea appealing. Given his goals, he wanted every advantage he could get. Any techniques he could glean from the experienced fighters on the Watch would prove invaluable in helping him close the gap between his skills and the six targets he had left.

And having disclosed this benefit, Godfrey folded his arms thoughtfully. “If I am to dangle further carrots… Ms. Hibiya, I’ve heard you enjoy dueling, especially making use of sword arts.”

“Indeed, I do.”

“I’ve some experience in that field myself. It might sound like a boast, but it’s safe to say I’m among the best students at the school. Does this serve as proof?”

Godfrey rose to his feet, pulled his athame, and held it at midheight. One glance at his form and a crackle ran down Oliver’s spine—perhaps more of a shudder. Nanao gave a slight quiver, too.

“…Beyond all doubt,” she replied.

“Good. Truth be told, I’m interested in facing you, myself.”

He grinned as he put his blade away. Then he sat back down and turned his gaze to Oliver.

“Same offer goes to you, Mr. Horn. Delicacy and deft are two words that come nowhere near my magic; my friends regularly say I’ve got a cannon for a wand. Were we to fight shoulder to shoulder, lord only knows how much I’d be relying on your polar-opposite approach.”

This did not seem like empty promises to aid in his recruitment efforts. Oliver decided Godfrey was merely clear on his strengths and weaknesses. Great mages often were.

But at this stage, Godfrey paused and let out a long sigh, frowning at his hands.

“Last, and this is purely personal… I’ve lost a precious friend, and I’m at rock bottom. I suspect…every member of the Watch is.”

It was like a light went out within. The bearing he’d maintained slipped away. Even his voice died to a whisper. He looked visibly smaller, and the silent friends on either side followed suit.

“We need your help,” Godfrey urged. “That’s…what this is really about.”

Oliver’s heart rocked with emotion. He could *feel* how low these three were. What they’d lost…was irreplaceable.

And Godfrey wasn’t concealing that weakness—wasn’t hiding behind pride or maintaining dignity. He was clearly suffering so much that even two kids, green behind the ears, seemed like salvation.

Nothing he could have said would get to Oliver more. He could feel the urge rising to agree on the spot. It felt right to do so. If he had to find a reason—well, he already owed Godfrey several times over. And not just him—the late Carlos Whitrow, too.

“…I’m afraid I can’t.”

Reason: That, and that alone, allowed him to refuse. Oliver, too, had good reason not to yield.

“…Right. Can I ask why?” Godfrey inquired, not a shred of resentment in his voice.

Oliver picked his words carefully. “I’m absolutely sympathetic to your goals. At the moment, I have no arguments with your plan to regulate the labyrinth. In that sense, you could say I support your principles. Yet, at the same time, could I join you in imposing them? Right now, no. I’m a mage myself. I have too many other fish to fry.”

Behind his words lay a thought: An orderly campus, the safety of the underclassmen…all of Godfrey’s goals are defensive. Mine are offensive—I have six remaining targets to take down. These two goals could easily conflict. I can sympathize with his motivations, but I can’t follow that same path.

Godfrey couldn’t know any of that—but he could tell this was Oliver being as honest as possible. A smile crossed his lips, and he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “It’s a shame, but it was not meant to be. Thank you for your time.”

“No, thank *you*. I hate to take your compliments and run. I may not be able to join the Watch, but should you need it, I’d be happy to help where I can,” Oliver replied. “I’d better go. Nanao…the choice is yours.”

He rose to his feet. There was nothing left to say—and trying to say more would only feel dishonest. He opened the door, bowed once, and departed, leaving silence in his wake.

“Then I, too, must take my leave,” the Azian girl said, rising to her feet.

“You won’t join us, either, Ms. Hibiya?” Godfrey asked, his smile growing forlorn. “My sword’s not enough?”

“Nay, it was more than sufficient. But surpassing that—my place is at Oliver’s side.”

She smiled brightly, holding no cards to her chest. Godfrey almost laughed aloud. Who could complain in the face of such earnestness?

Nanao, too, bowed her way out. When the door closed, Godfrey's shoulders slumped, like his strings had snapped.

"…Shot down twice! That was brutal."

"No surprise. Most people aren't as dumb as you," said Lesedi. "Though the samurai may be dumb in a completely *different* way…"

She mulled over the pair's responses. They'd both refused…and in the humblest of ways. Both were clearly conscious of the Watch's position and made an effort to match their candor. It was rare she met anyone that admirable at Kimberly. Yet…

"Not the boy, though. Now he—*he* had the face of a mage."

"Hold, Oliver!"

Wrestling with lingering emotions, Oliver heard a cheery voice behind. He turned to find himself face-to-face with a brilliant smile.

"Done already, Nanao? …You refused, I take it?"

"That I did. 'Twas a tempting offer, indeed, but my place is at your side."

"……!"

Nanao spoke like that truth was evident, and it left him gasping for air. She took two steps closer, looking him right in the eye.

"…Not to return the favor…," she began.

"……?"

"…but might I borrow your hand?"

She looked so intent. Hesitantly, he held out his hand, and she took it in both of hers, holding it tight to her chest. Her eyes closed, as if in prayer.

"Forgive what I harbor, though I know not if these feelings be true."

"…What?"

Words he could not hope to comprehend only rattled him further. But her smile returned, blowing the clouds away, and she led him onward down the corridor.

"Pay no mind," she said. "We must make haste to our next class!"

Their next subject was alchemy. As they waited for class to begin, every student wondered the same thing.

"Who'll it be this time?" said Guy.

"Since the first teacher vanished, it's been a rotating lineup of subs," Katie added.

"It doesn't matter who, as long as it *isn't* my father…," Chela said, sighing.

While Theodore had been standing in, his outlandish behavior had caused his daughter no end of headaches. Oliver glanced at Chela's profile and hoped—for her sake—they'd picked an actual replacement.

"Hokay, hokay…made it here somehow."

A thin man carrying a box heaping with teaching materials came in the door. All eyes snapped to him. He let the box thump down on the podium and wiped his brow.

“Whew… Uh, ahem.” Noticing his robe was rumpled, he tried smoothing it with one hand, smiled awkwardly, and then introduced himself. “Hi there. I’m your new alchemy instructor, Ted Williams. Lord knows if I can really take over from Darius, but let’s give it the old college try.”

Chela’s hand shot up. “If I might ask, sir—are you an official replacement? We’ve had a number of substitutes, you see.”

“Mm? Oh, right you are. Starting today, this class is entirely mine.” His face clouded over. “U-unless you object?”

“Not at all! We’re glad to have you, Instructor Williams!” Chela’s smile was as sunny as his wasn’t.

Oliver stifled a smirk, but Ted looked incredibly relieved.

“That’s a blessing,” he replied. “Uh, so…shall we begin? Page eight, please.”

In lieu of further greetings, the new instructor rolled right into his lesson. He briefly checked to what progress they’d made, then decided to get a handle on their skill levels. He had everyone put their cauldron on the fire, and as the students began brewing the potions, he paced the room, taking everything in.

“Oh, slight misunderstanding there. By ‘full moon wort’ they don’t mean the plant called fullmoon wort. Look at the herbs on the page before and you’ll see the one with round yellow leaves. Gosh, that explanation certainly is confusing. I’ll send the publisher a note later.

“Wash your knife each time! I know it’s a pain, but if the ingredients mix together while you’re chopping them, it’ll mess up the final brew. Just between us, as a student, I did some research on the effectiveness of this process, figuring it wouldn’t make much difference—but it was a fifty percent increase in the effectiveness of the resulting potion! I had to eat my words.

“You’re very careful with your cauldron. I used to always forget to clean mine, and then it’d get rusty, and I’d waste hours scouring it. I knew I just had to rub oil on it when the brew was done, but I’d get lazy…and all that scouring made the cauldron sides thinner and thinner. One day, I put it on a strong flame, and the bottom broke, and of course it was hair tonic, so everyone around me sprouted a beard like some sort of mountain man! I apologized after, of course, but at the time we all fell over laughing!”

Ted wasn’t just pointing out errors but also praising things done correctly and mixing in anecdotes to keep the mood light. Alchemy class had never been so peaceful—and it was over before they knew it. When the bell rang, Ted stopped pacing and returned to the podium, smiling at his pupils.

“That’s all for today. I’m relieved to see such dedicated students. Make sure to review the ten pages I mentioned—it’s not that many, so you should easily manage it after dinner. See you next time!”

And with homework assigned, he left the room. The students watched him go in disbelief.

"…Am I dreaming? Was that…a *normal* class?"

"…Same here. He was like the teachers in nonmagical schools…"

Katie and Pete had said it all. No being overwhelmed by the force of the teacher's personality, no lesson plans designed to result in grievous injury at the slightest misstep—none of them could remember *any* classes like that. Guy scratched the back of his head, unsure if he was daydreaming.

"Guess we actually got a *good* one? But hey, nice to see they don't only hire assholes. Right, Oliver?"

"…Yeah. Granted, it *is* only the first day," Oliver replied cautiously, putting his tools away. A first impression was hardly enough to make him let his guard down. This was *Kimberly*. If a teacher appeared to lack any claws or fangs, that only meant they were *hiding* them. "I'm gonna ask a question—just a little thing that's bugging me. You guys go on ahead."

The better the impression someone made, the more nervous Oliver got. Figuring it was best to get a read on the man right away, he quickly left the room, trying to catch up with Ted. And as he reached the bend in the hall, he heard voices coming from around the corner.

"How'd your first day go, Ted?"

"Stressed the whole time, Luther. Certain I'd disappoint my students."

"Please, I'm sure that wasn't the case. Hold that head high! Darius himself recommended you."

One voice was Ted's, and Oliver knew the second voice as well—the sword arts master, Luther Garland. Oliver stopped in his tracks, keeping himself hidden, and listened closely.

"That was the biggest shock," said Ted. "I never imagined Darius would appoint *me* his successor. He never once mentioned it."

"Really? When I was a student here, he often mentioned your skills. 'He might seem orthodox, but he has a real knack. The potions he brews always work better.'"

"First I've heard of it! He never did anything but ridicule me. He'd say my ideas lacked inspiration, that any fool can stand there and stir a cauldron—and so on and so forth…"

Ted sounded like he was wilting on the spot.

"I didn't fare much better," Garland said, his laugh rather hollow. "He outclassed me on all but my greatest talents. Which only motivated me to hone my sword art skills that much further… And I took it for granted that's how our relationship would always be."

Garland was typically gallant, but all trace of that had left his voice. There was a long and gloomy silence, and then Ted whispered, "…You really think he's not coming back?"

"The headmistress seems certain. She called off the search some time ago."

"Oof…I just can't believe he'd go down easy. I mean…Darius was no slouch. He could even handle active-duty Gnostic Hunters…"

“I agree,” Garland said, as if it ate him. “And that’s exactly why I have to know what happened.”

Then he broke off. “…So who’s that eavesdropping on us?”

“ ▁ ?!”

Oliver’s heart skipped a beat. *How—at this distance?!*

His mind spun furiously: Calm down. Don’t panic. You just came to ask Instructor Ted about class and were waiting for them to wrap things up. That’s all the explanation you need.

But would that work? What if they asked why he’d hidden so carefully? Should he say he’d been curious about Darius’s disappearance, admit he’d been eavesdropping, and apologize? Minimize the lie?

Could he pull that off? With Garland, a man concerned about the fate of his missing friend? He’d slain Darius Grenville with his own hand. Could he maintain his innocence here? Or would he make a fatal error?

“……!”

He couldn’t be certain. And the lack of certainty forced his hand.

Oliver scanned the ground at his feet. In the corner, he spotted a ball mouse—not an unusual sight, here. *Better than nothing*, he thought, whipping out his white wand and sending a wave of mana toward it. When the ball mouse turned toward him, he jerked his wand sideways—using the creature’s mana sense to guide it. The ball mouse scurried around the corner.

As it did, Oliver ran off in the other direction—careful to remain in full stealth mode. His eyes lit on the nearest classroom door, but he ignored it, slipping into the second classroom—where class had just ended and there were still plenty of lingering students. Like hiding a tree in a forest, he concealed himself amid the throngs of chattering students…

Back down the hall, the two teachers were glaring at the ball mouse.

After a long silence, Ted’s lips eased into a smile. “Ha-ha. Amazing, Luther,” he said. “You can even feel a ball mouse watching you?”

“…That was no animal.”

“Then a student pulling a prank? We did that all the time. Practicing our stealth techniques on teachers.”

Ted joked about their own risky school-age antics, which finally eased Garland’s tension.

“…True,” he admitted. “Probably not worth worrying about.”

He turned around and walked off down the hall with Ted, all the while telling himself he was getting a bit *too* high strung.

Oliver emerged into the hall again, tagging along with a group of other students. He kept moving for a solid five minutes, until he was sure there was no one else around. Only then did he let himself relax.

“…Hah…hah…!”

He slumped against the wall, breathing heavily. He’d been so tense every last nerve in his body was screaming. It had been a brutal reminder that spying on Kimberly teachers could come back to bite you.

“Quite the long face you’ve got there.”

“?!”

A voice came from right next to him. There wasn’t a moment to spare. Oliver drew his athame and swung it to his right.

He sliced only empty air. When he looked to the tip of his blade, he saw it was two inches away from a familiar small girl’s face.

After several long seconds, he sighed. “…You again, Ms. Carste? What use is there in startling me?”

“My apologies. I sneak out of habit now.”

Teresa Carste didn’t bat an eye, so he sheathed his blade. The emotional whiplash between stress and relief had sapped him of the energy to get mad at her.

“Spare me the excuses. What do you want?”

“Must I want something? The idea was that I follow you around like a puppy.”

When she just kept teasing, this time he did muster a glare. She lowered her eyes, chagrined, and tried again.

“Jokes aside, a word to the wise. I do not recommend approaching Luther Garland like that. He is head and shoulders above the other staff. He has even detected me when I was hiding in optimal conditions—if that conveys how dangerous he is.”

“…Yeah. Painfully so.”

This only drove home how reckless he’d been. Given their operations here, he’d been well trained in the art of stealth. That experience had led him to assume he was a safe distance away and should be able to eavesdrop without detection. And this was the result. *Should* didn’t apply to the exceptional. That was precisely *why* he had Teresa as a covert specialist.

And while he was being harsh on himself, stopping to talk like this could also attract unwanted attention. He shot Teresa a look, and they started moving down the hall together. She was silent for a moment.

“I assumed it was irrelevant, so I left it unsaid,” she began, “but I spotted Luther Garland in the labyrinth during the Ophelia Salvadori incident.”

“You did?”

His eyes went wide. Matching his pace, Teresa nodded.

“On the third layer, after I split off to cross the marsh. I was unable to catch up before the aria began, but once I reached the far bank, I followed in your footsteps—and saw him en route. Roaming the third layer, out in the open, cutting down every chimera that came his way.”

“……”

“I need hardly point out that his actions break the rule that faculty only act eight days after students go missing. He did not appear to be searching for Ophelia Salvadori’s workshop, so I was unsure of his purpose. What do you make of it?”

She left the interpretation to him, merely reporting the facts. In light of which, he pondered the question for a while.

"…Perhaps he simply chose not to wait. Eight days was too long."

"…Meaning?"

"Being Kimberly staff, he couldn't personally involve himself in the search yet. So he did what he could to indirectly aid Godfrey's efforts. By drawing the third layer's chimera to him, without anyone the wiser."

There were several other possibilities, but that one made the most sense to him.

"That had not occurred to me," Teresa said, stroking her chin. "…Might I ask your basis?"

"I have none," Oliver answered, his voice grim. "At best—the man's character. I can't deny he may have had any number of other motives."

His shadowy vassal was watching his expression intently. "In other words—you *like* Luther Garland?"

"……"

Her flat voice slipped into his ears. Her stare was cold, unblinking—it felt reptilian. And this wasn't the first time he'd sensed that quality from her. To Teresa Carste, Oliver Horn was her lord and master—yet also a subject to observe.

"Then what did you make of their conversation just now?"

Her question cut him to the quick. This was not an evaluation—she was *testing* him. He turned to glare down at her—but she was already nowhere to be seen.

"I spoke out of turn—pay it no mind. I take my leave of you."

He heard her speak but could not tell where from. Then the last trace of her presence faded. Kicking himself again, Oliver ground his teeth. Anyone not on his side could easily turn against him—he knew that. How much simpler things would be if they were all easily detested.

On his way down the stairs to the cafeteria, Oliver remained in low spirits. He had so many things to think over, but negative emotions were drowning them all out. He was not successful at holding them at bay, though he knew he couldn't let himself dwell.

"You free this weekend? Wanna grab a cup of tea with me?"

"No need to reject this offer out of hand! You know you're interested."

Dragging his mood with him, Oliver stepped into the lunchroom to find people chatting up his friends again—their attitudes as cocky as their connections were tenuous. Once again, Nanao and Pete were fending off invitations from students their age, whose names they barely knew.

"……"

A wave of irritation rushed over him. And the self-control that usually kept that bottled up was lost in the swirl of frustrations. As a result—he sped up, pushing through the crowds to his friends' table.

"Oh, Oliver."

"They're getting pestered again—"

Katie and Chela turned toward him, but their words went in one ear and out the other. He placed himself in front of Nanao and Pete, physically shielding them.

"We've already got plans this weekend!" he snapped, slapping the table with his palm. The force behind this was so unprecedented it alarmed not just the interlopers but his own friends. Eyes turned toward him from all directions, but Oliver's gaze was laser-focused on the two intruders.

"Er, um…"

"We could come along—"

They tried to stand their ground, but it was like throwing fuel on a fire. The pair sensed Oliver was about to reach for his athame, and they both flinched, already stepping backward.

"Okay, not an option! Sorry!"

"Excuse me!"

They spun around and ran off. Oliver glared after them a moment, but they were soon lost in the crowds.

"…Whew…!"

Buffeted by anger that refused to subside, Oliver let out a long sigh, forgetting to take a seat.

"…Th-this isn't like you, Oliver," Katie said, staring at him. She seemed slightly overwhelmed. "You *never* raise your voice…"

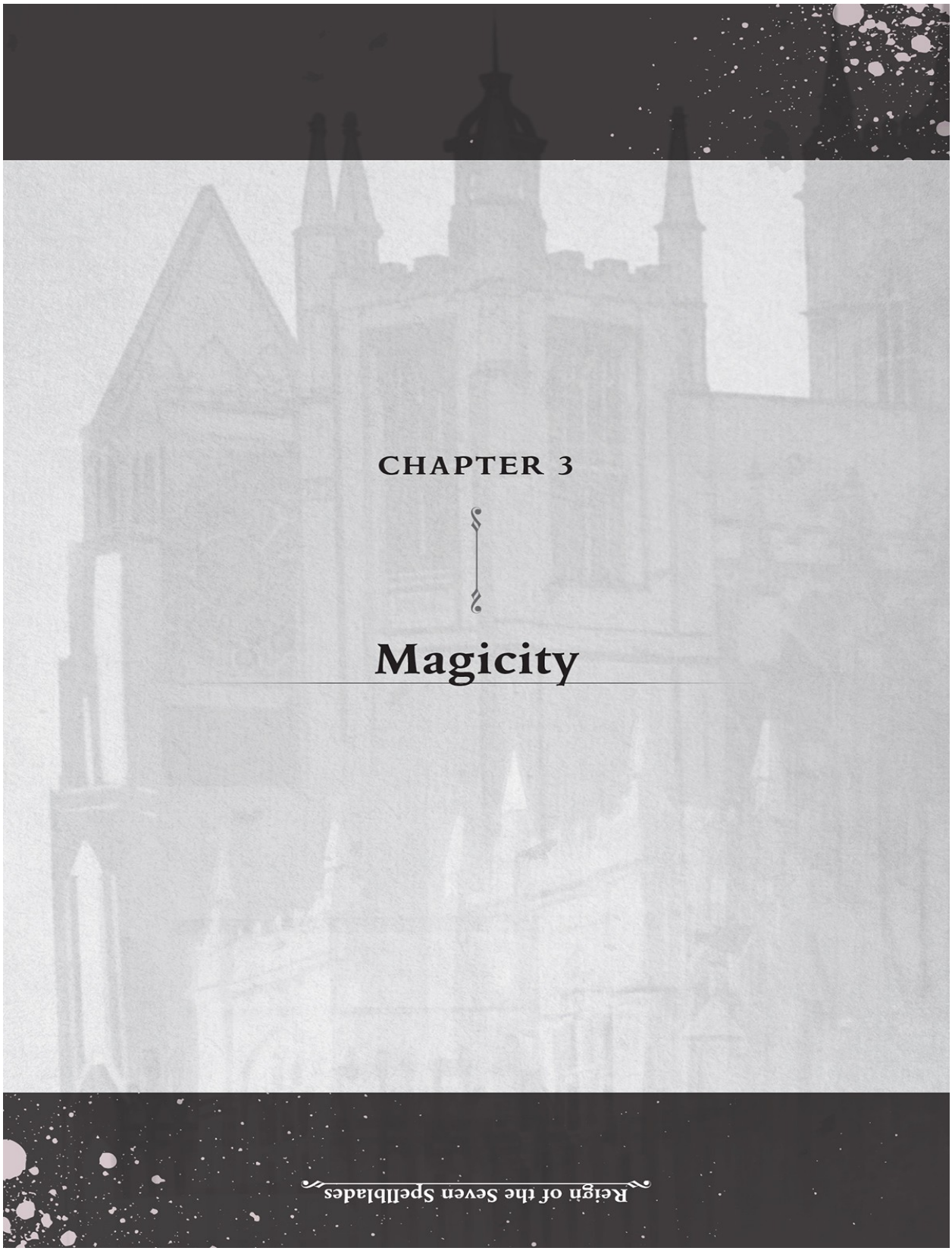
"Sheesh, somebody's pissed. Drink this! You need some white grape juice, bad."

Guy slapped him on the shoulder and slipped a glass into his hand. Oliver took it and downed its contents in one gulp, finally feeling calm again.

Chela studied this a moment, then said, "…Well, we can't exactly make him a *liar*."

She'd read his outburst as the result of mounting stress—and she was hardly the type to let that go untreated. The ringlet girl immediately proposed the best remedy.

"We could all use a little fun. What say we pay a visit to Galatea this weekend?"



CHAPTER 3

Magicity

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Magicity

Kimberly was a boarding school, and everything students needed could be found on campus. The cafeterias served an endless variety of meals, and the many shops were constantly rotating in fresh stock. Ask an embroidifairy, and you could get any clothing you liked, custom made. Students had every liberty they needed to go about their lives.

But Kimberly was dangerous. The risks of campus life were high enough to undermine all those perks. Their first year had been more than enough to hammer that point home, and that was time enough for most students to get pretty strung out, longing for a breath of fresh air.

And when that happened, one place called to them. Few could resist.

"…Hup…!"

Spotting the landing zone beneath them, Guy steered his broom down, reaching the ground first. His feet hit solid earth—but the momentum was too strong, and he reeled forward. As the others landed behind him, he staggered several steps, narrowly avoiding a face-plant.

"Ahhhhh! Sweet freedom!" Guy yelled.

The view before them was certainly a sight for sore eyes.

First, the sky—partitioned off by a latticed dome. Below that was the sprawling town with throngs moving about the street by the landing. Shops and homes of all shapes and sizes lined the roads, and if you looked up, there were a number of other shops suspended, bagworm-like, from the dome's frames. These were accessible only via flight.

Countless brooms and magic carpets were carrying people and cargo to and fro, following paths marked by light. In the square nearby, a magicraft fountain was writing letters in the air—and over the rush of its waters, they could hear merchants hawking their wares.

"…I know it's been a while, but I don't remember this place being so *loud*," Katie mumbled.

Meanwhile, Guy looked ready to rush off on his own—but Chela put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

"Cool heads, Guy. It's a thrill for us all, but if you start yelling, you'll startle the locals."

"Actually…they don't look the least bit startled," Pete said as he surveyed the area. "Seems like they get this a lot…"

Both the mages landing around them and the ordinary folk walking past were doing little more than flashing smiles of recognition.

"Well, yeah," Oliver said with a smirk. "They get a *lot* of Kimberly students cutting loose here."

"…Fair," Katie muttered. "I'm struggling not to lose *my* head, too…"

She was positively vibrating.

Meanwhile, Nanao was still soaking in the view.

"It *has* been a while. I spent a few months here before school began," she explained.

"Oh, when you were learning Yelglish, right?" said Oliver. "Nice place to live?"

"Entirely. I merely had to explain that I would soon be a Kimberly student, and everyone around bent over backward to assist me."

"They would." Oliver nodded and glanced up ahead. "Most people here have a high opinion of Kimberly and anyone connected to it. The whole town is reaping the benefits of having a famous magic school nearby. Definitely a mutually beneficial relationship… It's a bit remote, but it basically functions like a college town. And among the town's benefits is a financial payment from the school. Essentially…reparations."

"But that in turn makes it a popular destination for students on their day off," Chela added. "The whole town is so welcoming that…it just feels *right*."

She glanced back, noticing several other students landing and racing off into town. Seeing her own group itching to follow suit, she turned to face them.

"…However! Make your hearts like dragons and remember always the words I am about to say—"

But Guy was quicker. "Don't do anything to harm the rep of our school or its student body, right? We know already!"

The wind fell from Chela's sails, but Katie and Pete were both frowning.

"What does that even mean…?"

"I thought the same thing."

Neither of them had any clue how outsiders expected Kimberly students to act. Sensing the source of their confusion, Oliver stepped in.

"Think of it the other way around. Take anything that's typically Kimberly and put it away in the back of your mind. Don't go for your athame without *very* good reason. Assume no real trouble will arise, and even if we do get in some, remember that a fight here is *not* usually fatal. Even against another mage, you don't want to blast a spell the moment you say hello."

A year in that hellscape had warped all their sensibilities.

"…Oh, right," Katie said, grimacing. "That's…usually a bad thing, huh… You see that all the time on campus, but…that's actually wrong…"

"Don't you start crying on us, Katie. I might have to join you."

Guy was already dabbing at his eyes. The shock of being dragged back to earth really drove home just how nuts their school was.

"Chin up, you two," Chela declared. "Today is a respite from all that bloodshed. Come! Follow me!"

She led the way, and everyone else trailed behind. They joined the throngs on the main street and took care to stick together.

"So many people! Mages and otherwise…!" said Katie.

“Yeah,” said Oliver. “Eighty percent of the town’s population are nonmagical, yet they live hand in hand with magic in nearly every way. It’s a quintessential magicity.”

“Oh, a panini shop!”

That caught Guy’s interest, and he darted off. The others slipped to the side of the road, waiting, and he soon came back with a paper-wrapped bundle.

“Wow, that’s massive…”

“Guy, are you sure you should be eating all that? They have food where we’re going, you know,” said Chela.

“Farmer’s sons can pack it away, lemme tell ya. I grew up on five meals a day! And in my experience, ordinary folk make the best food.”

Guy peeled open the wrapper. The panini had been sliced neatly, and there was steam rising off it. He pulled out a piece and bit into it, and his eyes went wide.

“Maaan, that’s good. You gotta try a bite!”

That certainly got everyone’s attention. Hand after hand reached out for a piece. Everyone looked astounded when they took their first bites.

“Oh my gosh, that’s *amazing*! What’s in this sauce?” Katie asked.

“I’ve never had anything like this before, myself,” said Chela.

“Lemme go ask! Hold this!”

Guy shoved the bundle at Katie and rushed off back to the stall. They watched as he spoke to the shopkeeper, then slipped back through the crowds to them.

“He said it’s a Ytallian technique involving fermented tomatoes. Apparently, it’s starting to take off over here, too!”

“Aha,” said Oliver. “That makes sense. I’ve heard Ytalli has a big foodie culture.”

“This is delicious! I must have another.”

“…Wait—it’s gone?! Nanao! You ate mine, too?!”

Guy had left the group for mere seconds and came back to find nothing but toast crumbs. Nanao happily polished off her third piece, ignoring Guy’s fury. The others laughed. It was Guy’s fault for leaving food unclaimed in front of her.

“Kimberly mages, take a gander,” called a voice behind them. “We’ve got all manner of study aids in stock.”

Their spot outside the flow of foot traffic was in front of a shop, and an old woman was waving them inside. The shelves were covered in all sorts of things—far more than you’d ever expect a shop of this size to carry.

“Whoa, that’s a tenfold memory tonic!” Guy cried. “Never seen a real one before! Supposedly, you drink one of these, and for the next hour you can even remember the cracks in the floorboards.”

“Wait, really? If they’re that good, I oughtta get—”

“Don’t you dare, Pete. Sure, they *work*, but they force you to remember all sorts of unnecessary stuff, too, so it’s a net loss. It’s one thing if you’re

cramming for exams, but for daily use, you'd want something a little milder. I can brew one for you."

"O-oh. Got it."

Pete pulled his hand back, minding Oliver's warning. Chela laughed at this—Pete would likely have argued with anyone *other* than Oliver.

"Oh, the decoration on this pen is amazing! So detailed! What mage did this?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Little lady, that's by a nonmagical artisan."

"It is?! Wow, you can do *this* without magic? How?!"

Katie had found a fountain pen in the shop window with a unicorn motif. She was clearly captivated; her eyes nearly bulged from their sockets when the shopkeeper said who had made it. Chela peered over her shoulder.

"If mages make it, they call it rodmade, but this is handmade," the ringlet girl explained. "We may rely on magic for everything, but that means we've lost any number of crafting techniques. Including this sort of nonmagical metalwork."

"That approach was commonplace in my country as well. Though I saw nothing of this artistry in the markets. It must be the work of a true artisan."

Now Nanao was peering at the fountain pen. Katie stared at it a moment in thought, then asked the shopkeeper, "Um…h-how much is it?"

"That pen would be eight thousand belc. You want it, little lady?"

The price tag took Katie aback. She slumped her shoulders. "Th-that's a lot…! I could buy two treatises with that much…"

"It's a fair price considering the craftsmanship involved," said Chela. "They do have cheaper rodmade products over here."

"…They're cheap, sure, but…clearly mass produced…"

"That's what makes them affordable. I'd say they're likely made by familiars."

As Chela evaluated the quality, Katie worked her way down the heap of pens. Ultimately, her budget forced her to narrow her purchase down to two pens. Everyone else was just window shopping, so they all left together. Guy was in a very good mood, having feasted his eyes on all sorts of trinkets.

"They had real magic tools just sittin' there with the normal stuff. Do nonmagical folks buy those, too?"

"Memory tonics could well be poison, so I doubt the shop would let them," Oliver said, looking at the passing shop windows. "But otherwise, I'm sure if the need arises, they do. There's a whole field of magic tools designed for ordinary use."

"…The boundaries are fuzzier than I'd assumed, then," Nanao said. "The tales of Western magicians passed down among my people involved toiling over a cauldron in the depths of the woods. Nothing like the reality I see before me."

"Wow, that's hilarious! You thought we lived like elves?" Katie asked.

“Well, it’s not entirely baseless,” Oliver said, stroking his chin. He imagined how these stories might have spread overseas. “What Nanao describes is how magic was practiced before the magic industrial revolution. Before mages became the ruling class of human society, they either rejected contact with ordinary folk and formed small communes or lived in isolation like hermits. That’s probably where Nanao’s ideas came from.”

“Pre-Union—or while there were still only a handful of members. Naturally, even then there were rulers who took mages in and valued them, but that was the minority,” Chela explained. “Clearly, we’ve since formed healthy relations with the ordinaries, but that was not always the case. I’ve heard there were times when betrayals were common and persecution rampant. Now it’s downright unthinkable.”

Katie had been listening to Chela’s passionate lecture with great interest, but then her attention was caught by a big carpet on the side of the road. People had been waiting for it, and they started climbing aboard. Her eyes gleamed.

“Oh, a carpetpool! I love those! Can we take a ride?”

“What? Don’t be a weirdo,” Guy teased. “We’ve got *brooms*.”

“Carpetpools are a part of the magicity spectacle, though. We can take a ride if you like, Katie,” said Oliver.

Ultimately, they all agreed—and took up seats on the carpet. Once the stop had emptied, the cross-legged rider up front patted the surface, and the carpet lifted up, carrying its twenty passengers into the sky.

“Flying carpets… You often see the little ones from the Rug order, but creatures this large are only seen in magicities. It’s quite a comfortable ride,” said Chela.

“Hrm. I find it rather unsettling. So floaty!”

“……”

“Pete? Why are you scowling?”

“…I once stepped on a wild carpet, and it flipped over on me. Brings back bad memories.”

“Ha-ha-ha, I know the feeling!” Guy said. “I got punched in the crotch by a wild broom once.”

Oliver had similar childhood memories. Flying magical fauna were so integral to people’s lives that no matter where you grew up, you likely had a story to tell.

Gazing down at the streets of Galatea, Katie gave the carpet a pat on its back.

“Your fur’s a bit mussy. I know it’s hard to keep you groomed with everyone you carry around, but… Oh, I wish I had a brush.”

“You’re such a kind soul, Katie,” Chela said. “Perhaps some other time, though. Our stop’s coming up.”

It wasn’t long before the carpet began descending. When it reached street level, all six friends hopped off. Oliver got his bearings—according to

his mental map, they were a good mile from the previous stop. At that speed, it was clear why nonmagical people valued carpetpools.

"Well, we've done some sightseeing—shall we get lunch?" Chela suggested. "I have a reservation at a favorite, unless anyone objects?"

"That's what I wanna hear! I'm starving!"

"The very words I awaited!"

The group's biggest eaters were the first to chime in, and Chela escorted them to their lunch destination.

Not surprisingly, the Lily of the Valley was crowded—Chela had been right to place a reservation.

Wooden tables were packed in, with customers rubbing elbows at them; soot-stained lamps hung from the rafters. Bottles of alcohol with labels in various languages lined the windowsills, as if insisting this was a *pub*, not a restaurant.

The six of them gathered around a table in the corner, and the staff boomed a welcome. Menus flew toward them, alighting at the center of the table. Clearly a prompt to decide their orders before a server got there. A brusque approach to customer service, even for a pub—but somehow that felt *right*.

"This place is hoppin'!"

"Chela, what's good here?"

"This establishment specializes in traditional Yelglish cuisine. The Kimberly cafeteria menu is impressively international, but I do feel it's somewhat lacking in anything explicitly Yelglish. I thought we could make up for it here."

"Especially for our two overseas students," said Oliver. "Nanao, Katie, let me warn you: Our food might not be as fancy looking as Ytallian or Lantshirian food, but they make up for it in heartiness… At least, I think so."

"No need to get defensive before we even order, man! Should we start with fish and chips?"

"Yes, and shepherd's pie is obviously a must. Perhaps some sausages—?"

"Oh, I want this! The jellied eels!" Katie said, pointing at the edge of the menu.

A shudder ran over the table.

"……You're really going there, huh, Katie?" said Guy.

"……It *is* on the menu," added Chela. "I just…unconsciously put it out of mind…"

"Er…wh-what? It's a famous dish, right? Is it not good?"

"I've always found eel delightful," Nanao said, blinking.

Guy crossed his arms pensively. "…Your thoughts, Chela?"

"…Flavor is a subjective concept. My father delights in this dish and regularly polishes off entire bowls."

"…I'm staying out of this one," said Pete.

The four of them settled into an uncomfortable silence, but this seemed to pique Katie's curiosity further, and she decided she was definitely getting

the jellied eels. A server soon swung by, took their order, and retreated to the kitchen. The group chatted away while they waited, when…

"Pardon me, young mages. Could I trouble you for a moment?"

…a voice came from the aisle. They turned to find an old woman—she looked nonmagical—with a younger woman in tow. Certain she was talking to them, Oliver responded.

"Yes, madam? Can we help you…?"

"Just a small favor. Nothing that'll put you out. Could you cast a spell on my daughter here? She's seven months pregnant, you see."

The younger woman's belly was visibly swollen. Seeing this register with all of them, the old woman continued.

"All of us want nothing more than for the baby to be born healthy and sound, and if the child has a knack for magic—well, that would be a delight. I hoped you might indulge us there."

The mages looked at one another. Oliver was soon appointed spokesman.

"I'm afraid there's nothing we can do that would turn an unborn child into a mage. We can certainly say a charm for safe delivery, if that would suffice…?"

"Oh, oh, absolutely. I'm sure she'll love it!"

A smile appeared on her wrinkly face, and she pushed the other woman forward. Oliver aimed his white wand at her belly and whispered a spell… but to ensure it had no negative influence on mother or fetus, he kept the health boost at nigh placebo levels.

"…Th-thank you!"

"Isn't that nice, dear? I'm sure your child will be a fine mage one day! Then everyone will be happy."

Oblivious to Oliver's reluctance, they bowed repeatedly and went back to their table. Oliver turned back to his friends with a sigh.

"…That superstition isn't going anywhere fast," he said. "With few exceptions, it's impossible to predict the magical aptitude of a child from ordinary parents, and there's nothing we can do to influence it."

"No, there isn't," Chela agreed. "But I sympathize with the urge to do anything you can, no matter how low the odds. Having a mage born from a nonmagical family is simply that big a deal. It changes the entire family's future, not just the child's."

"…It's not always celebrated," Pete muttered.

"? Pete, what was that?"

"Nothing."

Katie blinked at him, but he just shook her off, and then their food arrived: fresh fried fish and potatoes, pie oozing juices from the cuts, and an array of beautifully browned sausages. Guy had knife and fork at the ready, eager to dig in.

"Ooh, here it is! Mind if I put vinegar on the fish and chips?"

"Better save that for your own plate, Guy. Oh…*this* came, too."

Oliver pushed one particular dish away from him—a grisly-looking horror amid all the tantalizing gastronomic delights. It was a yellowish gelatin in the shape of a pudding, with chopped-up fish meat suspended in it. A kinder person might call the visual *arresting*, but most would go straight to *gross*.

Oliver took a spoon, scooped out a portion, and handed it to the curly-haired girl.

"Your jellied eels, Katie. Let's hear your unvarnished opinion."

"…H-here goes nothing." She gulped.

A hush settled over the table. Clearly sweating it, Katie raised the spoon to her lips. A mass of jellied eels landed on her tongue—and she gingerly bit in.

"……"

"How's our local delicacy treating you, Katie?" Chela asked.

"…Man," said Guy, "that face just screams uncomfortable."

"Looks like she's racking her brain for the right phrase," said Pete.

"Hmm? I must sample this for myself."

Nanao scooped a serving of the jelly onto her own plate and took a bite. They heard her swallow, but only silence followed.

"……Nanao……?"

"……"

The Azian girl was mechanically working her way through the portion, saying not a word. Two bites, three bites, four—like a duty had befallen her, not a single variance in the motion. Her friends quickly grew perturbed.

"…Uh, wait. I've *never* seen Nanao eat without a smile!"

"Consider carefully, Nanao! If you don't like it, you're under no obligation to finish!"

"…Your concern is unfounded. All foods are a gift from the land, and it would never do to waste—"

"Okay, we'll all eat a share! Even split! Just…stop, please!"

Oliver pulled the plate away from her. Chela, Guy, and Pete each grimly forced a portion into their mouths. Once the plate was safely emptied, Oliver put his spoon down, sighing.

"It's been years since I last ate this, but the experience…hasn't improved," he said. "Here, Nanao, maybe some cider will wash the taste away."

"Much appreciated."

Nanao took the drink and chugged it, then put the glass down with a sigh. A long silence followed before she slowly turned to Oliver, who sat next to her.

"…Oliver, might I ask you to place your face closer to mine own?"

"Mm? …Is there something on it?"

Blinking, he leaned toward her. She put her hands on his cheeks, examining him closely.

"……"

"……?"

Oliver had no idea what this meant. Then—her hands reached around his head, and something soft pressed against his face, blocking his line of sight.

It took him a moment. Then he realized what she'd done, and his whole body quivered.

"…Wha—?!"

"Huh?!"

"My."

"H-hey!"

"Wow, bold move."

Nanao had just thrown her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. Each of their companions reacted in their own way, not that Oliver himself was in any state to notice. The gentle scent invading his nostrils, the warmth of her breath on his nape, and the soft, supple yield of her flesh pressed against his face—each of these alone would be downright dangerous, and all three of them were hitting him at once, without any warning.

His rational mind flailed, struggling against the shocking onslaught. This made no sense, it concluded. Nanao was certainly touchy-feely, but never had she demanded such forceful contact out of the blue.

There must be some other factor involved. Armed with that supposition, Oliver's suspicions turned to the glass she'd been holding. He twisted, freeing one hand from her embrace—she didn't let go, so he was left fending her off with the other—and sniffed the glass. It smelled exactly like he'd feared, and he glared at his friends.

"Why is there booze at the table? Who ordered this?!"

"Huh? I only ordered cider," Guy said, blinking at him.

Chela quickly took a sip from her own glass.

"Oh. This is definitely *hard* cider," she said. "Made almost the same way, but they don't stop the fermentation as early. With this much alcohol in it, it absolutely *will* get you drunk."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-hehhh… Oliverrrrr…!"

As if confirming Chela's analysis, Nanao leaned her whole body against Oliver, cheeks visibly flushed. He hung his head, convinced. No doubt about it—Nanao was *plastered*.

But then he realized they had a solution. It was a bit forceful, but there were ways to sober her up. He reached for his white wand…

" !"

…but before he could, a shock hit his nether regions like a hammer to the groin, and a heat shot up his spine so fast it made him dizzy. The rest of him went cold—this was *bad*.

He quickly shoved Nanao away and got up with such a start that his knees bumped the table. As everyone gaped at him, he wheeled around and headed for the back of the restaurant.

"Er—where are you going, Oliver?" Katie asked.

"…Bathroom. Might be a while," he managed and then moved as quickly as his trembling legs would allow. Nanao tried to follow him, but Chela grabbed her collar.

Casting a spell to sober her friend up, the ringlet girl narrowed her eyes at Oliver's retreating figure.

"……"

Perhaps because of the sheer crowds, the bathrooms in the restaurant weren't enough for all the customers—and there was an overflow set in the building next door. Oliver followed the signs to those, going out the restaurant's back door and into the door opposite.

"…Shit."

There was no one else here, thankfully. He stopped trying to keep himself together and braced both hands on the mirror. The sensation of Nanao against him would not stop looping through his mind, and the heat shooting up from his groin was only getting worse. Trying to get his ragged breath under control, he spoke aloud, chastising himself.

"…Simmer down… It's been *months*…!"

He gritted his teeth. This was a disaster. Two months had passed since he last had symptoms. He'd been handling contact with girls just fine. So he'd just *assumed* it was out of his system. Did Nanao just matter more than other girls, or was it the intensity of the contact combined with the surprise factor—or all of the above?

"…Aftereffects?"

"?!"

A voice came from behind, and he jumped, spinning around. The ringlet girl was standing there, carefully monitoring his reaction.

"Chela…?! Why are you—? This is the men's room!"

"No matter. It's you I'm here for."

She stepped closer, examining him. His elevated breath, the sweat on his brow, his fists clenched tight, the nails digging in. She even checked the disruptions in his mana circulation—all without actually touching him.

"I'll ask once more. Is this a lingering effect from the Ophelia incident?"

Her tone didn't suggest she was going to let him dodge the question. He couldn't meet her eye.

Panic rising, he muttered, "…It's no big deal. Just a little Perfume left over."

"After *four* months? That's a *very* big deal!"

She angrily shot his protestations down, then took another step closer, grilling him.

"I know you may not want to talk about it, but you have to. Have you had any contact with the opposite sex since then? Not an accident like just now, but…the real thing?"

"……"

"…I thought not. No, I knew better."

Taking his silence as denial, Chela sighed. Still very grim, she caught his eye and held it.

"I could see Guy or Pete being ignorant of it, but you—I'm confident you're well aware of the simplest and most effective means of removing any remnant Perfume influence: *Satisfy the urge*. And not alone, but *with* someone."

"……!"

"You inhaled a considerable amount of Perfume after we reached the third layer. That alone would have a critical effect on anyone, but the density went through the roof once the Grand Aria deployed. From the very start, I knew it would be a problem. There's no way you could remain impervious to the effects."

Chela bit her lip—mad at herself. Oliver shook his head.

"…There are *other* means," he insisted. "Appropriate potion dosage, exercising self-control, aligning mana circulation with the rest of your systems—it's manageable. It takes a while, but—"

"Four months is not 'a while.' Stop being so stubborn and admit it. Your approach was clearly not enough to rid you of this much Perfume. You made the wrong choice."

Chela was not letting him weasel out of this one. Oliver scowled at the floor, clenching his jaw. He couldn't argue with her point. But…

"…Even so…it's not *your* problem."

His voice was a growl. A clear rejection. He almost never talked like this.

"This is my body—it's a personal problem. You've got no right to be telling me—"

But even as he tried to draw the line, she reached out and grabbed his wrist, pulling him close. They glared at each other, noses almost touching. Her eyes shimmered.

"Say that again," she hissed.

" — !"

"It's not *my* problem? …We've explored the labyrinth depths together, fought side by side, faced mortal peril, our hearts as one. And something that happened to you as a result isn't my problem? Are you honestly saying I don't have a right to be concerned when you're suffering?"

Her voice shook. Anger—but mostly hurt. They fought together and survived—and he'd rejected the bond that fostered. That wounded Michela McFarlane to the quick.

"If you really think that, deep down…then shake me off. Reject me, push me away, tear up my feelings with your own hands. Along with any bonds we forged in that battle!"

She was forcing a choice—well aware it was hardly reasonable. But she *had* to.

Because she *knew* he'd been suffering ever since that day—hiding that, acting as if nothing was wrong—and she was the only one who'd noticed.

More than once, she'd considered doing something. But he never asked for help, never even grumbled, just kept his dire discomfort to himself…and she read that as a conscious choice, one that mattered to him. So she'd done nothing, not wanting to stomp into a friend's inner sanctum.

But she could only bear it so long. This moment was the end of the line for her—and Oliver got that. He realized how much she'd been worried about him, how much it had pained her to let him be…and how keenly she felt for him.

"……!"

And—that just made Oliver feel *responsible*. He'd been about to reject her, his arms raised to push her away, but they fell limp to his side, and he instead lashed out at his own failings. Chela picked up on that, too—and felt a massive wave of relief.

"……Good. You're not going to shake me off."

"……"

Oliver didn't speak, didn't look up. Her hand still on his wrist, she led him, unresisting, into a stall. This surprised him, but before he could protest, she closed the door.

"Chela?! What are—?"

"You're suffering, and I'm here with you… There's only one thing for us to do."

Face-to-face with him in the narrow stall, her eyes didn't waver. She'd picked a course, eliminated the obstacles, and was now carrying it out as best she could. That's how witches did things.

"Hardly the best locale, but at least they've cleaned it. Nothing ruins a mood like filth."

She chuckled softly, then took a step closer. He tried to back away but came up against the door, and as if to brush aside his last shred of resistance, she leaned in, whispering in his ear.

"Don't worry. We're not doing the deed here… You know as well as I do. At times like these, mages often take care of things without resorting to intercourse."

She slowly reached a hand toward him, tracing his side with her fingers —a sensation that sent a tingle through his entire body.

"……! ……Ah……!"

"A variation on healing arts… Caresses use the same principles. Just relax. Leave all of this to me."

Making it clear she knew what she was doing, Chela slid her hand slowly up his body. Rubbing his skin, touching the muscle beneath, tampering with the flow of mana. A wave of irrefutable pleasure ran up the boy's spine, like cold water sliding down a parched throat. Sensual contact with the opposite sex—regardless of what his reason dictated, that was what his Perfumed body desperately craved.

"No one's ever touched you like this, have they? …Goodness knows how much you've trained. There's not a part of you not honed. Not a muscle, not

a drop of manaflow that isn’t polished to perfection. Like a handmade craft: detailed, yet nothing wasted…”

“……Wait, Chela—don’t…!”

As her exploratory caresses continued, Oliver tried to resist, his arms lacking all strength—but they were both mages, and she had more mana than him, which made her stronger. She easily overcame his feeble resistance, whispering in his ear again.

“……Would you rather ask Nanao, if you’re dead set against me handling it?”

“……!”

“If you promise you’ll ask her, I’ll stop. But if you can’t do that…then I’m finishing things up here.”

Then she put her lips on his earlobe. Oliver’s sight instantly whited out. This stimulus was far beyond the caresses. His blood and magic all flowed to his groin, forcibly activating the biological phenomenon he’d been struggling to control. He tried to pull his crotch away, but Chela went against that, wrapping her hands around his waist to pull him close.

“Don’t pull back. No need to hide it. That’s *exactly* what we’re doing here. And feeling your excitement makes me feel secure.”

As she whispered, her eyes glanced down. His pants bulged outward. The stiffness of it pressed against Chela. She felt not only the tension but the heat of it, despite the fabric between. Reflexively, she started to reach for it—but he grabbed her wrist.

“…Unh…”

“…Sorry. We’re not ready for that yet, are we?”

She moved her hand back to his torso. She had things running at her speed, but he was still deeply resistant. Going too fast would provoke further rejection.

“…I’m getting a feel for this. Right here, isn’t it? Your weakness. I can’t just prod it hard. I need to stroke softly, coming in waves…like this.”

“……!”

She was carefully working out where he wouldn’t fight her and focusing her caresses. Where to push, how to stroke, how hard to prod—not just looping but trying new patterns, teasing out his vulnerabilities. She was good at this sort of trial and error—and soon got results. The sensual intensity had Oliver’s eyes unfocused, a heat on his breath.

“You’re getting more responsive. Then…shall we go a little harder?”

Deciding it was time, Chela stuck the middle finger of her right hand into her mouth. Moistened with her spit, she brought it to his belly and slipped it into the center—his navel. His hips jerked instantly.

“ ― Ah ― ?!”

“Ripples through you, doesn’t it? The belly button once linked you to the womb, so it’s *always* been a channel for mana. And it’s very sensitive to stimuli and close to your genitalia…but of course, you know all that.”

Even as she spoke, her finger was digging around inside his navel. A wet squelching sound echoed through the stall. The boy closed his eyes, trying to endure the heightening pleasure.

Caressing him, Chela thought, Hearing nothing in return certainly makes this a bit lonely.

Since they’d first met, she’d always been herself with him. They were equally well educated, commanded a wealth of spells, readily looked after their friends… Having so many points in common was part of why they got along so well. But it was more than that.

Their shadows lay equally deep. This boy was a mage *of her caliber*. She’d felt as much since they first met, and much more clearly than with Katie, Guy, or Pete. They still had the brightness of youth, their heads held high above the waters of the magic world—but Oliver Horn was watching that from deep below the surface.

“……”

She’d plunged those depths countless times herself. The McFarlanes were one of the five oldest families in Yelgland. Everyone involved

shouldered some of that shadow. In that sense, she'd even sensed a kinship with Ophelia Salvadori—descendant of a succubus, born to an ancient lineage.

And she felt something similar from Oliver. Deep in their hearts, she felt sure they understood each other and empathized. That was *why* he always understood when she made a mage's choice—she almost never had to explain. That made her happy, comfortable—and sad.

"……Mm……"

Still stimulating his navel, she put her lips to his cheek. In a sense, what they were doing here only worked because they had that understanding.

A mage would do *this* when it was *necessary*. Both of them knew that, which made it possible—barely—for this to register as *treatment*. It allowed them to reduce a physical act of love to a medical procedure.

"……Your self-control is still holding strong. If you just accept this, you'll feel much better."

"……Unh……!"

No, she was the only one *reducing* anything. Even as she whispered sweet words to accompany her touches, she kicked herself for it. He might not be stopping her, but he had definitely not wanted this. This was sex without mutual attraction, a heartless exchange demanded only by sorcery—and Oliver loathed that more than anything. Their year together had made that very clear.

He was trapped in a contradiction. As deep in the darkness of magic as any ancient family heir, yet stubbornly resisting the corruption that darkness demanded. Two things that could not coexist.

"Being on the receiving end too much for you? …You can touch me, if you like."

She took his hand and pulled it to her, echoing the thought in her mind. *This* contact had heart. She felt for his suffering and yearned to free him from it. That was *why* she was doing this…even if she'd used their friendship to force him into it.

"Hahh, hah……hah……!"

Their guilt hiding beneath the pleasure, her petting went on. Oliver's arousal had been rising steadily—but it reached a pitch it would not move past.

She didn't need to ask why. He was holding himself back. She was impressed despite herself—the lust and stimulation of this act and the Perfume could easily have overwhelmed him. She was prepared to grant him what indulgence that drove him to, within reason. But he had yet to lay a finger on her of his own accord.

This was a true feat of endurance. She genuinely respected the effort. But more than that—as a witch, she was frustrated. She was doing all this for him—and couldn't push him over the edge.

"……"

Then, what? Keep massaging until all logic failed him? Touch him somewhere more direct? Chela considered both options, then ruled them out.

They didn't have much time to spend on this. And if she pushed her luck and he rejected it, the setback would be costly. She needed a third angle of attack.

"All right, then… Let me tell you a secret."

"……?"

Oliver looked perplexed. She changed up the pattern of the finger in his navel, putting her lips to his ear.

"Do you remember our conversation before we headed into the labyrinth? …I didn't plan on involving you or Nanao. I was going to make contact with the upperclassmen and plunge into those depths all on my own… But you stopped me. You took my arm and swore you wouldn't let me go alone…and with such strength it felt like you would never let me go," she told him. "…That felt so good. I was…overjoyed. I almost burst into tears, right then and there."

Those emotions had stayed with her, lingering. And Chela was no longer hiding them. Stimulating his carnal desires alone would never break through this boy's self-control. Breaching those defenses required an emotion he couldn't push away: genuine affection.

"……Che…la……," Oliver stammered.

The ringlet girl spoke plainly, with a warmth he could not refute. She felt his mental walls crumble ever so slightly and did not let that pass. She stepped in through the gap, whispering the words—nay, the *spell*—that would seal the deal.

"I still remember it. The look on your face, the warmth of your palm on my wrist," she said softly. "Sometimes, when I think about it…I touch myself—in bed, stifling my breath…"

" !"

Vivid images filled his mind: her breath as ragged as his was now, her cheeks flushed, indulging herself under cover of darkness. The covers slipping aside, the curve of her shoulders peeking out. Sweat glistening on her breast, slim fingers sliding between her legs. And that imagery all connected to the waves of pleasure rushing through his navel…

" Auhhh……ah……!"

A shock ran up his spine, and everything went white.

The pleasure robbed him of all thought, his resistance rocking like a dinghy on the waves of a storm. And at the height of that ecstasy—like clutching for the last shred of self, his nails dug into Chela's back.

"……!"

She accepted that pain head-on, embracing him as he did her—and seeing it through. Watching Oliver's body convulse with the ultimate pleasure, releasing a fraction of his mana to the world, feeling the

corruption he'd been harboring pass out of his system. A faint, sweet odor of Perfume teased her nostrils.

"…Good. We got there."

Chela smiled and brushed his hair. Not yet recovered from the climax, there was no strength in his limbs, and he clung to her like a child. As a witch, she felt pride; as a friend, she felt guilt.

"Any mess down there? I tried to lead you to a dry orgasm, but I'm afraid I don't have much experience with these things… If I got it wrong, please let me know."

She spoke tenderly, supporting him in her arms. At length, he recovered enough to shake his head and pull away. With his head still down, she could not read his face.

"Okay. I'd love to linger in the afterglow, but if we take too long, our friends will start to ask questions."

She spoke with regret, then stepped in close, pulling his head to her chest once more. Then she kissed his brow three times. Like making excuses, she thought. Like insisting this was not an act of lust but one born of genuine concern for him.

"I'm going to head back first. You'll follow a few minutes later. Once we're all back at the table, it'll be just like always. No need to dwell on this further."

She left him with that and tore herself away. Once he was sure Chela had left the bathroom, Oliver leaned back against the wall, sliding down to the floor.

He buried his face in his hands and let out a sigh so long it was as if he were trying to expel his internal organs.

"…This *again*…"

Meanwhile, Chela made sure the coast was clear and slipped out of the men's room. She headed straight for the women's restroom next door and into the furthermost stall, where she locked the door. And like the boy across the hall—buried her face in her hands.

"_____ ~~~~~~~~~~!"

A voiceless scream escaped her fingers. Never before had she been so ready to die of shame. It felt like every inch of her skin was being pricked from within by an infinite number of needles, her skin crawling, mingled with pain—a sensation the likes of which she'd never experienced.

"…What…what am I even *doing*…?" she croaked, her voice shaking.

She couldn't believe her own actions. Doing *that*, with a friend… It was all too much.

That had not been the plan at all. She'd only followed him into the bathroom to tell him she knew what was wrong with him; aware he couldn't talk to anyone about it, she couldn't let him suffer alone. And she'd thought that would be the end of it.

"…I have so much more to learn than I ever realized…"

She bit down on her lip, well aware of what had lit a fire under her. Oliver's words—*"It's not* your *problem."* Nothing that followed had been a measured response. She *had* to prove him wrong. *Had* to take his suffering on, even if it cost her their friendship.

And once she'd made that choice, she'd acted without a moment's hesitation. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she wasn't behaving rationally but led him to the heights of pleasure anyway. You could say she'd acted like a proper mage. If you like someone—*take them*. Whatever her feelings for the boy, that instinct had definitely been a part of it.

Had she hurt him? A whole storm of emotions was raging inside her, and that single fear rose to the surface. What transpired between them had *not* been entirely consensual. In hindsight, she'd definitely forced him into it. He hadn't stopped her, but that was because she'd used their friendship as a cudgel. Had she simply let her selfish impulse take control and molested him?

And that wasn't all. The final step she'd taken was clearly too much.

"Sometimes, when I think about it…I touch myself—in bed, stifling my breath…"

Her own words echoed in her ears. When she'd voiced them, she'd been so sure it was the best way to reach him. And it had worked. His stubborn refusal to climax had melted, and she'd brought him to orgasm. She could still feel the triumph and exaltation of that moment.

But once it was all over? Now that she'd calmed down and remembered what she'd actually *said*? She could never do that again. She'd bite her own tongue off first. That was unlikely to prove fatal in her case, but it would at least prevent her speaking.

"…Even if the *treatment* was a viable argument…I didn't need to go *there*…!"

She let out a soft moan. No matter who it was or what their connection—some things were best kept to oneself. No friend should ever have to know something like *that*. It had been completely inexcusable. She'd lost count of how many inexcusable things she'd done today.

"…I've got to head back before Oliver does," she muttered.

She had no end of regrets, but she couldn't sit here scolding herself forever. She slapped her cheeks a few times, getting it together—and made her way back to her friends.

Oliver returned five minutes later and found everyone sitting at the table, just as he'd left them. Guy looked up from the sausage he was cutting and yelled, "That took forever, Oliver! You got the runs?"

"Guyyy! We're *eating*! …But seriously, are you okay? We saved some food for you if you can still eat."

As Oliver took a seat, Katie gave him a worried look. Next to her, Chela did the same.

“I’ve got some stomach medicine if you need it, Oliver. Would you like some?” she asked, pulling a little bottle from her pocket.

She made this seem perfectly natural, acting just like she always did, and that helped Oliver get himself back under control. Chela was right. It was better for everyone if they both acted like nothing had happened.

“…No, thanks. It’s just been a while since I left school, so it got the best of me. All better now.”

Oliver waved off the medicine and gave Katie an awkward smile. Back to normal—but as he let himself relax, Nanao leaned closer. He blinked in surprise, and she studied his face for a long moment.

“Indeed, you seem far more hale than you did earlier… Like an ill spirit has left you, perhaps…”

“ ⎯ !”

His heart skipped a beat. She had keen eyes—exactly how much did they know?

He was worried she knew everything, but a fresh wave of guilt quickly drowned that out. Still, he bottled both emotions up tight, responding with a veneer of aplomb.

“…I see you’re no longer drunk, Nanao. We would’ve had a rough time exploring the town if you’d stayed that plastered.”

“Ha-ha-ha! A disgrace, for sure. I have sampled spirits during New Year’s celebrations but am hardly an old hand with them. I had no idea they induce a state of such euphoria!”

“Glad you’re over it!” said Katie. “And since it’s Guy’s fault for ordering that stuff, he’s gotta pay your portion of the tab.”

“?! Wait, since when?! Augh, there goes my shopping budget…”

Guy’s punishment left him white as a sheet, and as Oliver chuckled at that, someone tugged his right sleeve.

“…You’re not forcing it, right?”

He turned toward the voice and found Pete leaning in, looking up at him with concern. Oliver felt the last shred of tension leave his shoulders. He smiled for real and put his hand on the bespectacled boy’s head.

“Not at all,” he said. “Thanks for worrying, though.”

He mussed his friend’s hair, and Pete snorted, pulling away. They were always like this in their room, and that really came as a comfort now.

With lunch finished and their check paid, they headed out into the bustling crowds once more. Guy looked both ways, then turned back to his friends.

“So? What’s the plan?”

“Katie wanted to stop by a magical creature shop,” said Chela.

“Ms. Miligan asked me to pick up some supplies while we were in Galatea. It won’t take long, I promise!”

“Just don’t keep us stuck there until dark,” Pete insisted. “I’ve got places I want to go, too.”

“I—I wouldn’t do that! I’m not buying any animals today. Just running Ms. Miligan’s errand, then looking around real quick…probably…I think…”

Katie's eyes started shifting back and forth. Everyone steeled themselves for the long haul—but followed her lead to the magical fauna shop. A five-minute walk from the pub, they found a big sign with wings on it.

"Oh, this one! Müller's Magical Creatures! Let's go in!"

Katie was already in the door. The others filed after and were met with a zoological musk. The shop itself was spotless, with high ceilings and magical creatures of all shapes and sizes huffing about in their cages. Some were highly active, while others curled up asleep; still others had their tails dangling, eyes on the intruders. Katie was already making the rounds, clearly enchanted.

"Wow—this place *is* huge. Guess it ain't the closest shop to Kimberly for nothin'."

"They can even get oversized creatures in on special order," said Chela. "Though they aren't regularly in stock."

"We get enough of those at school… Does this place have any, like…cute creatures? Something more wholesome?"

"They've got lots! Pete, come look with me!"

Katie pounced on Pete's shred of interest and began pulling him around the store. He'd had a year to know just how animal-obsessed she was, and he was long past trying to fight it. The rest of the group followed.

"Aw, warg pups!" Katie said, stopping. "Look, it's drinking milk! So cute!"

"Those things from the welcome parade? They were a little larger, but I guess ones this young aren't much different from ordinary dogs."

"Wargs are man-made magical beasts—basically, regular animals altered with magic," Oliver explained. "Just as loyal as regular dogs but with heightened senses and strength. Of course, it depends on the owner, but they're usually just as affectionate, too."

The warg pups were all wagging their tails. They were already as big as a midsize dog but clearly still very young. Katie reached into the cage, and one of them licked her fingers.

"Hee-hee-hee! You're a friendly one! Maybe two months old? The fur on the tail's still not all grown in."

"Only two months? Why, a full-grown creature must be the size of a foal!"

Seeing their interest, a clerk came over.

"You Kimberly students interested in a warg pup today? These ones are bred for nonmagical homes, so I think you'd find them a bit lacking. We've got tougher breeds in back, if you'd care to have a look."

"Oh, no—I'm not buying any animals today. They're just super-cute!"

They all turned toward the clerk; a young man in his early twenties, he wore a short-sleeve shirt with the store name embroidered on it and plain cotton slacks. But the athame and white wand at his hips made it clear he was a mage.

He seemed quite approachable, so Pete glanced once more at the cage, then asked, “Um…I’d read about it before, but do ordinaries really keep wargs? Isn’t it dangerous for nonmages?”

“Mm? Oh, that depends on the breed. Anything you find at Kimberly is gonna be a lot more aggressive and retain its prey drive,” the clerk replied. “But the majority of breeds wouldn’t pose a problem. In fact, wargs were originally bred largely as guards for nonmagical households. For most of their history, people wanted them as fierce as they are loyal. In those days, kobold attacks were a lot more common, you see.”

He spoke with practiced ease—he probably had to rattle this speech off a lot, working here.

He glanced around the nearby cages, adding, “Of course, that’s not all they’re prized for. There are hunting wargs, tracking wargs, or wargs that are best kept as pets. They’re bred for all types of owner needs. Our shop’s got a motto, ‘A warg at home, and you’re ready for anything.’ Which is a bit exaggerated, but they *are* great value for the price. Smart, obedient, don’t eat too much, don’t demand too much of your time. The life expectancy’s just shy of six years, which is a bit short, but that’s because they’ve been bred to mature faster and not linger on into old age. A pup today is fully grown before you know it, and they go out just as quick, too—never a burden on you. You can just buy a replacement!”

He seemed quite proud of that, but Katie’s brows were twitching. “…Not even six years?”

“Mm? You wanted a longer life expectancy? There *are* special breeds for that.”

He seemed to think that would be reassuring, but Katie’s friends knew better. She took a long look at the tail-wagging pups and shook her head. “No, not today. Um…do you have diagnostic equipment for trolls? It’s for a purebred Gasney.”

“Oh, sure. The demi-human corner’s over here. You’re keeping a troll in your second year? Unusual!”

“Um, yeah. It’s a collaborative research project with a fifth-year named Miligan…”

She intended that as a simple statement of fact, but the clerk spun around like he’d been shot. His cheery smile entirely gone, he was eyeing her sternly.

“…That explains it,” he said. “You’re Katie Aalto, right?”

“Y-yes, I am…”

She took a step back, a little freaked out. The clerk rubbed his temples, sighing dramatically.

“You should’ve said so. I’ll take twenty percent—no, thirty percent off your order.”

“……Huh?! Wh-why?”

“Show of support…or condolences. Either way, with her snake eye stuck on you, I’ve got no end of sympathy. Just accept it—please.”

With that, he turned on his heel. As they followed, he called over his shoulder.

"And fair warning—don't turn your back on her. She's got a screw loose and will pop your head open like it's a box of candy. And the fact that she doesn't mean any harm makes it worse. She genuinely doesn't get why it's a big deal."

That hit way too close to home. For all Miligan had helped her, Katie was not inclined to argue. But the clerk had one last final blow.

"Also, send her a message from me. 'Your stunt has the civil rights crowd after our shop! Customers are scared, and we're losing sources! How you gonna make up for that, huh? How?!' Give her that verbatim!"

Contrary to expectations, they wound up spending very little time at Müller's Magical Creatures. They bought what Miligan had asked for, and Katie immediately said, "Time to go." No one argued.

"……"

Outside, Katie was clearly taking it hard. Her shoulders slumped, her whole frame visibly smaller.

Guy was searching in vain for a way to cheer her up, but all he managed was a spluttered, "Uh, so…well…"

"L-let's go somewhere a little more cheery, shall we? I know just the place!" Chela suggested, unable to bear watching. She quickly led them away.

Up ahead, they saw a particularly gaudy sign. On it was a glowing wand striking down a silhouetted magical beast. In the bottom right corner was a note saying MAGES ONLY.

"A shooting range," Oliver said, nodding. "That *would* get our minds off things…"

"…The targets aren't alive, right?" Katie asked, peering over his shoulder.

Chela put a hand on her hip, wheeling around to face her. "Don't worry," she said. "This place only uses dummies. There *are* shops out there that use live targets, but given the cost of managing and keeping the creatures, they're *very* expensive. And the civil rights people have been up in arms, so they've been closing down."

Katie looked relieved. Guy proceeded to roll up his sleeves.

"Then we can go all out, work up an appetite for dinner! C'mon, Katie!"

"Eep…!"

He'd put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her right in the shop. Maybe a bit rough, but it was clearly his stab at cheering her up. The others were right on their heels.

Inside, they could hear incantations echoing. There was a counter right by the door, and beyond that, a series of lanes—rather like the ordinary folk game called bowling. Several lanes were already occupied, and mages were firing spells at the targets in back. Cheers went up on a successful hit, and feet were stomped on a miss.

“Welcome! First timers? Confident of your skills?” the man at the counter asked.

They inched closer, eyes moving to the blackboard with the rules.

“Looks like we can set the difficulty… Easy, normal, hard, and very hard, huh?” Pete had to think about that one.

“If you can clear very hard, there’s a luxurious prize!” the middle-aged clerk said. “Nobody’s managed it yet this month, but will you try your hand?”

He pointed his thumb at the board behind. There was a row of brand-new magic tools, prizes given out for set difficulty clears. Guy and Katie were both moaning. Given how much these cost in shops, the price of an attempt might well be worth it.

“…Fascinating. Care to test our mettle, Oliver?”

He blinked. Guy was prone to that sort of challenge, but this one came from Chela. She’d seemed more like the type to accept a challenge, not make one.

“…You…don’t have to,” she added, suddenly looking worried.

That explained it; she was still worried about the incident at lunch.

He knew exactly why—and what she’d be most concerned about. She’d challenged him to gauge his reaction, to see how he felt. Was he holding the earlier incident against her? Did he hate her now? Had she hurt him?

“……”

It pained him to know he was making her feel that way. It was his fault she’d done that for him and his fault she was feeling anxious.

He could never hate her. He knew this was all his fault. Letting the Perfume problem linger, not being able to hide it properly—all of this was because he’d failed to take care of things himself.

It *did* hurt—but that was an old wound he’d carried for some time. Not one Chela had made. None of this was her doing.

If that wound was still festering, still bleeding—that was all *his* sin.

“I don’t mind. But if I’m up against you, I’ve gotta go all out.”

He smiled, accepting his friend’s challenge. She looked both pleased and relieved. *Good*, he thought. He didn’t want to drag her into his own feelings or cause any unwarranted anxiety or guilt.

“We won’t be able to keep up with them, so why don’t we stick to normal? Let’s see which of us is better, Nanao!”

“Challenge accepted, Katie! I have been practicing my skills.”

“I’m no slouch in marksmanship, either. Pete, what’ll you do? Gonna try out easy mode all by yourself?”

“Obviously not. And I’ll make you eat those words.” The bespectacled boy glared back at Guy, clearly fired up.

The clerk grinned. “Two for very hard, and four for normal! Very hard pair, come right this way.”

He led the group into the main shop and waved Oliver and Chela to the far left. It was much larger than the other lanes, with several piles of parts

and a twenty-yard-wide magic circle on the floor. He directed them to its center.

"…Does this mean there'll be targets all around us?" Oliver asked.

"This mode is all about realism! And they're not just targets. These dummies fight back."

"That's certainly not what I imagined…," said Chela.

But nonetheless, they took their positions. The clerk stepped out of the circle, drew his white wand, and tapped the tip to the floor.

"Two players…and you're both Kimberly students, so: Begin Kimberly Mode."

""Kimberly Mode?!""

That sounded incredibly ominous. But the magic circle was already live. The heaps of parts were putting themselves together. Oliver and Chela braced themselves as the beasts moved in for the kill.

The battle raged for thirty minutes, and their spells echoed the entire time. Finally Chela's magic crumbled the last of them, and the glow at their feet died away. "All done!" the clerk boomed, and a roar went up from the gallery.

"Great job! Wow, I can't believe you actually beat it!"

"Those numbers were nuts! I was freaking out the whole time!"

"……."

"……."

"That didn't seem like a game at *all*… Here, drink these. You need a break."

They stepped out of the circle and took the drinks from Pete without a word. Both chugged the contents and slammed them down on the nearest table.

"So many enemies! So long! And those dummies are stupidly efficient!"

"It demands curved shots, piercing and broadsides, *and* you've got to vary the elements?! Any dummies that slip through are brutal! How was that a *game*? This is essentially combat training!"

Oliver and Chela were basically shrieking, their friends nodding along. They both collapsed onto the table, and the clerk came over, beaming.

"Amazing victory! Can't believe you're both in year two. We don't usually get any victories until at least year four!"

He jabbed his thumb at the counter. They looked up at the shelves lined with prizes—being packed up by another staff member.

"There's a bunch of extra prizes, so we'll have them delivered by carpet later. But the real prize is this! The two-player trophy!"

He grinned and set it down between them: a weighty brass trophy depicting two mages, wands at the ready.

Chela took it, and the clerk started clapping.

"Great fight. You're today's best couple! Survivors of a battle that fierce are bound to be together for years to come!"

With that blessing, he slapped them on the backs and returned to the counter. They gaped after him for a long moment, then their eyes went to the trophy.

"…It seems a bit late for *that*," Chela said. "We've been fighting side by side all year."

"True. But nothing wrong with a belated acknowledgment."

They both pulled out their white wands and tapped them together above the trophy. They'd won this prize together. And this gesture was their little celebration.

But when she saw that, the Azian girl clutched a hand to her chest.

"……?"

"……Nanao, what's up? …Stomachache?" Katie whispered, pulling her aside. Nanao's hand never left her heart, clearly at a total loss.

"I know not what this means. My chest just…clenched up."

Her eyes drifted over her shoulder, to where Oliver and Chela were chatting happily. Nanao might be confused…but not Katie.

Oh…I knew it.

After that, they all stuck to regular lanes, giving one another handicaps where needed and thoroughly enjoying their matches. A year's experience made a big difference; Nanao had barely been able to launch a spell at first, but now she was shooting down dummies like the rest of them. Pete unveiled a curve shot he'd been secretly practicing, and the uproar never subsided.

After a solid four hours of fun, the light outside turned crimson, and they settled the tab for all that bonus time. Outside the shop, they breathed in the fresh air, savoring the evening chill.

"Woo, I had a blast!" Guy said, stretching. "Already sundown? Time sure flies when you're having fun."

"You sound ready to go back in," Chela said with a laugh. Then she tapped her pocket watch. "But it's high time we head to our dinner reservation—once again, it's a popular destination, so I took the liberty."

With the sun setting and dinnertime approaching, the streets were somehow even more packed. Sticking to the main drags would be a hassle, so they quickly stepped onto a side street. It might be a little out of their way, but it was much easier to stay together.

They headed out, keeping a safe distance from the maddening crowd, with Chela leading—until she suddenly stopped in her tracks. The others looked up ahead and saw three small figures, maybe half their height, seated on the side of the road and looking exhausted. They wore gray coveralls and hats, but beneath that, green skin and long, hooked noses were visible.

Recognizing those traits, Katie leaned forward. "They're…"

"Goblins? Don't see them in town often," Guy said.

Green-skinned goblins were, like trolls, one of the more common types of demi-human. The six friends watched as the goblins passed through a gate into the building beyond; it seemed like someone had called them in.

A few seconds later, Katie stood where they'd rested, gazing at what they'd left behind.

"…They dropped this."

"A hat?" said Pete. "Given the size, it must belong to one of those goblins."

Katie picked it up, examining it. "Goblins don't usually wear hats," she said. "Is this a factory…? I'm gonna ask inside!"

As soon as the idea struck her, Katie was inside the gates. She reached an unadorned iron door and knocked.

"Hello? You dropped something!"

"…No answer," said Oliver. "But I can hear sounds…"

"It doesn't appear to be locked. And we have a fine excuse to intrude. Shall we step through and inquire within?"

At Chela's suggestion, Katie nodded and pushed through the door. The interior did not seem to be well ventilated; they could smell the dust in the air.

Behind the door was a wide-open space with a low ceiling and several long, narrow tables. The place was packed with over a hundred goblins, each of them silently trimming or polishing bits and pieces, parts for something. When work was completed, the pieces were placed on carts pushed around by roaming goblins, then replaced with a new batch. Aside from the odd confirmation, no words were exchanged. Just tiny bodies, laboring away in matching uniforms, and eerie silence.

"…This is…"

"…A workroom. These goblins are employed here," Oliver said.

As he did, someone came down the stairs next to them. A nonmagical man, wearing the same uniform as the goblins (save for the size). He frowned at them.

"…Mm? What brings Kimberly students here? This isn't open to the public, you know."

"Oh, we just found this outside…," Katie said, holding up the hat.

He came over and took it from her, nodding.

"Ah, yeah. This is one of ours, all right. You shouldn't have." He turned toward the floor. "Yo! Who dropped their hat? These kids picked it up for you!"

A hundred pairs of goblin eyes turned toward them, and Katie flinched despite herself. A moment later, one goblin left their desk, plodding over to the group.

"You again?" The man sighed. "No matter how many times I explain it, you just won't keep the uniform on. How thick can one goblin be? …Go on, thank her."

He held out the hat, and the goblin took it with both hands. The demi-human looked up at Katie and said, “Tanks,” but before she could react at all, they were already headed back to their station.

“Ugh, sorry. They’re not much for manners. They *are* just goblins, after all—they’re like that with everybody.”

“Th-that’s fine, but…aren’t these clothes uncomfortable? Snow goblins might be okay, but these are forest goblins, right? They don’t usually wear long sleeves like this.”

“Mm? Sure, that’s true, but there are rules for them living in human towns. They roam the streets with that green skin showing, they’ll scare people. Covering it up makes a big difference.”

He made a face, but not out of any guilt. Clearly, this was just a fact of life to him.

When Katie fell silent, he added, “They do good work, though. Little hands are good for the details. They don’t complain, and we don’t have to pay ’em much. If we hired humans to do the same work, it’d cost us five times as much, so a little rudeness is well worth it.”

This just made it worse, and Katie was left entirely speechless.

“So…anything else?” the man asked. “If you’ve got business, we do have a reception room.”

“……N-no,” Katie said after a long, strained silence.

She turned on her heel, and the others followed her out.

“I dunno if this helps any, but…that’s probably one of the better places, y’know. They get treated way worse out in the boonies. The civil rights people probably put the pressure on.”

They were walking through the sunset-drenched side streets once more. Guy wasn’t the only one worried about Katie’s mood; Chela also chimed in.

“…All I know is that demi labor is the foundation of modern magical society. And that knowledge makes it hard to call this situation ‘wrong.’”

Katie stopped in her tracks, spinning to face Chela.

“You think that was *right*, Chela? …Honestly?”

“……”

“Stuffed into that cramped space, forced to wear constrictive clothing, paid a fifth of what humans get—and that’s all okay just because they’re goblins? You think that’s right? You think that’s acceptable? They’ve got feelings! They should be living the way they always have!”

Everything she’d been holding back tore out of her. Faced with this tirade, Chela kept her face blank, merely lowering her eyes.

“Easy, Katie,” Oliver said. “Before this town was founded, this whole area belonged to the demis, goblins included. We’re living on stolen ground. Insisting they still have to live the old way is…pretty presumptuous.”

“Presumptuous how?! It’s obviously better if everyone’s happy!”

“Even if your pens cost five times as much?”

He glanced toward the bag in her hand, and she froze up completely. Oliver nodded. What they’d just seen directly affected their lives.

“You knew already, didn’t you?” he said. “This problem isn’t simple enough to discuss in black-and-white terms. Our country—the entire Union—is built on the backs of the demi-human working class. The two pillars of the industrial revolution were magic-based technology and their labor. And the result is a human population that’s grown to a point where life is unsustainable without it.”

“……!”

“I sympathize with your frustration. And that’s why I want the discussion to be specific and constructive. Chela was speaking the truth from her position. Lashing out at her for it won’t accomplish anything.”

Oliver’s placating tones gradually got through, and Katie turned toward the ringlet girl. Seeing how sad her friend looked, she threw her arms around her, tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Chela… I shouldn’t have gone after you like that…”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for. It’s a friend’s role to face these feelings head-on.”

Without a word of reproach, Chela hugged her back. That seemed to settle things, and they started moving again. It was another ten minutes before they spotted the lights of their restaurant destination.

“That’s the place, right?” Oliver said. “Let’s hope some food’ll lighten the mood.”

Inside, they looked around. This place, too, was packed—but unlike the lunchtime pub, everyone was keeping their voices low. There was more space between tables, and the ambience was more suited to enjoying a relaxing meal.

“Reservation for McFarlane, party of six, if you’re ready for us.”

“Ms. McFarlane, we’ve been expecting you. Your table is in back.”

The waiter bowed his head politely and led them to the far right table. Chela explained that she’d signed them all up for the course dinner, and they need merely wait for their food to arrive—but then they heard voices at the next table.

“…Hey, aren’t those uniforms…?”

“Yep…”

Getting an ominous vibe from this whispering, Oliver perked up his ears. He found an excuse to glance behind him and saw a group of eight mages, boys and girls alike, in dark green robes seated around a nearby table.

He kept an eye on them, and soon enough, one of them got up and headed their way.

“You’re all from Kimberly Magic Academy, right?” the mage boy said, stopping by their table.

“We are. And you would be…?” Oliver asked, picking his words carefully.

“Featherston Sorcery School, third-year, Daniel Pollock. My friends and I are doing what we can to earn civil rights for the demi-humans. And I’ve got words for you.”

The moment he said his name, Oliver was 80 percent sure where this was going. Featherston lay to the southwest of Galatea, and their school motto was all about reason and friendship. That alone pitched them against the Kimberly approach, and the two schools' students frequently clashed. Plus, the current Featherston principal was a hard-line civil rights supporter.

But as Oliver considered his response, Pollock slammed a hand down on their table.

"Don't get too comfortable!" he roared.

Eyes were turning toward them all around.

"…Kimberly Magic Academy second-year, Oliver Horn," Oliver began quietly. "Please, settle down, Mr. Pollock. We're not looking for a fight. We're just here to have dinner."

"You say that, but you'll attack as soon as we let our guards down."

"We're done losing! We know full well none of you have any scruples."

More Featherston voices were coming in from the nearby table, backing Pollock up.

"Do you have any idea how many demi settlements got crushed last year, despite our efforts to protect them? And the bulk of them wound up at Kimberly, to be experimented on."

"Dissecting your way through countless innocent demis…! Their blood's still on your hands, and you think you have the right to eat here?"

"……Urgh……!"

Katie let out a groan, clutching her head. And that provoked Chela.

"…We've heard your complaints," she said. "But it's a mistake to consider Kimberly a unified front. This girl, too, is a civil rights supporter—just like you. At the very least, your complaint does not apply to her."

She took the curly-haired girl's hand, holding it tight.

The Featherston students frowned. "A supporter…? Ridiculous. No one who cares about civil rights would go to *Kimberly*."

"You're not one of *us*. You probably just think demi samples make good decor."

"Urghhh…!"

"Yo, I've heard just about enough! Can't you see you're hurting her feelings?"

Guy jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over. The whole Featherston contingent were on their feet now.

"Kicking your chair, you brute? You ready to take this outside?"

"Sure, why not? Let's go! If you wanna lose your teeth before your meal arrives, I'm happy to help!"

"My, my, how savage. They can't even tell how outclassed they are. We've got third-years on our side!"

Guy was now midway between the two tables, facing down two Featherston students at once. Any false moves and everything would erupt. Oliver tried one last time to prevent it.

“Wait…! Everyone, settle down! We’re all enjoying our weekends; no need to butt heads!” He thought for a second. “I know, let me show you a trick—a gesture of goodwill!”

Oliver pulled out his white wand. The Featherston students all reached for their athames, but he waved his free hand, smiling, and pointed his wand at himself.

“Elemusal!”

As his incantation echoed, countless sprouts grew from his collar. The tip of each formed a bud, which bloomed, covering his entire head in baby’s breath.

His face peering out from beneath the blossoms, he nervously turned to the Featherston students.

“…Wh-what do you think?” he asked. Even if they didn’t laugh, he’d hoped he could at least ease the tension. But instead, something cold hit his face. The boy in front of him was sneering at Oliver, an empty glass in his hand.

“No need to thank me,” he said. “You gotta water flowers!”

Cold water ran down the back of his neck, dampening his shirt and robe. This got Katie and Chela on their feet, furious, but before either could speak —a flash of light shot across the room.

“Aughhhhhhh!”

There was a scream. As the light faded, the Featherston student dropped to the floor, face covered in blood. Nobody knew what had happened.

“ — Huh?”

“……What?!”

He’d been *attacked*. As that realization settled in, the Featherston crowd looked up—and found a boy in glasses scowling at them, arm still extended from the burst orb he’d thrown.

“Say you’re sorry,” he hissed. One look in his eyes showed he was well past angry and borderline homicidal. Even Oliver gulped. He’d never seen his roommate this worked up.

“P-Pete…?”

“Heads on the floor and beg Oliver for mercy. *Now!*”

Pete was drawing his athame as he roared. The hostility was so raw that the Featherston group took a step back.

“Y-you little—!”

“How dare you!”

They all reached for their own athames—but Guy’s hand clamped around one member’s wrist.

“Outside,” he growled. “I ain’t in the mood for sorrys.”

The tall boy’s voice was so low his opponent gulped. The only thing keeping Guy from punching him right here was a desire not to brawl in a place that served good grub. Pete was well past that and already picking out the first spell he planned to throw.

And as the shop buzzed over the brewing fight—three customers rose up from the next table.

"This clearly isn't fizzling out. Okay, set the stage."

"Eight against six, and Featherston started it. Those odds work for me."

"Get those tables back. Chef, we're good, right? Damages on our bill."

Three young men and women had stood up in turn, their wands casting magic on the tables and chairs before shoving the food and diners to the sides of the room—and clearing enough space for a brawl.

Katie, Chela, and Nanao moved from the table before their chairs were swept away, then joined their male compatriots. The Featherston students gathered around their fallen friend; the two groups glared each other down.

"Listen up, second-years!" the man clearing chairs said. "Lemme give you a word of advice. I'm only gonna say this once, so don't you dare forget it: This is Kimberly's town! And if someone starts a fight—*you end it*."

The three older mages stood around the ring like referees, grinning. All three were Kimberly upperclassmen—and the chef shrugging in the kitchen an alumnus. Oliver winced. Galatea could be terrifying.

"Wha—?"

"Huh…?"

"Uh…um…"

The Featherston folk hadn't caught up yet; they stood frozen with their hands on their hilts. But two boys in the front weren't waiting.

"Fragor!"

"Rahhh!"

Pete's explosion spell hit a third-year girl head-on, and Guy's fist bounced off a second-year boy's head. Neither Featherston student had time to react at all, and as the others scrambled to respond, the two boys plunged directly into the fray.

"This is a joke, huh? You ain't half as scary as the folks at our school!"

"Grab that asshole who dumped water on Oliver and heal his damn face already! The rest of you aren't getting off that easy!"

Outnumbered but undaunted, their relentless charge clearly unnerved the Featherstons. The key to victory in a sudden brawl was not technique or strategy—but starting it yourself. Getting momentum on your side could sweep you all the way to victory—if nothing went wrong, of course.

Guy and Pete weren't thinking about that, though; they didn't need to. They'd managed a year at Kimberly, a year in which their lives were in danger on a regular basis. They'd long since internalized the attitudes required to survive.

"Y-yiiikes…!"

"They're insane…!"

The Featherston crowd was not so lucky. Their civil rights–loving principal kept order, and their campus life was so peaceful it might as well not be on the same planet as Kimberly. None of them had ever been in real trouble. Fights at their school followed rules and were minor scraps at best

—but Kimberly fights were one step shy of “to the death.” Before you even compared their abilities as mages, that mindset alone left Featherston kids permanently one step behind their Kimberly counterparts.

“W-we can’t let them—gah!”

Three fellows went down in the blink of an eye. Only then did a Featherston girl attempt to fight back, but as she swung her athame toward Guy, a lightning bolt from the back of the room struck her chest, knocking her to the ground.

“Katie…”

The curly-haired girl had her athame out, a few steps behind the boys. Chela shot her a look of pure shock.

“…You think you can say whatever you like…?” Katie said, her voice trembling. “W-well, not—not with me around…!”

Sadness, anger, self-reproach, frustration—and emotions she couldn’t even put a name to—all churned within her gaze. No one from Featherston could know what she’d gone through last year: getting a harsh dose of reality, rethinking her ideals, struggling to find a balance between the two—desperately trying to work out what it was she should do.

“Allow me to join you, Katie.”

But Nanao knew. And so she took her place at Katie’s side. After a year of sharing a room, she was the closest friend Katie had—and her greatest emotional support.

Chela took one look at the two of them and sighed.

“…Fine, you’ve forced my hand!”

Abandoning all hope of stopping things, she drew her own athame. Fights like this were clearly beneath her, but she’d heard her friends be insulted enough for one evening.

Only one person was still attempting to maintain order: the Featherston leader, Daniel Pollock. Face twisted in anguish, he was trying to rein his own friends in.

“Wait! Don’t—! Dammit, this isn’t what—”

“…I agree, Mr. Pollock.”

A boy came up to him, brushing the baby’s breath off his collar. Pollock took a step back, but Oliver kept talking.

“This is a quiet restaurant, and I’m sure you expected our exchange would end with a simple argument. I won’t blame you for that error in judgment—I missed my chance to rein in my friends, too.” He paused. “And I think we *both* underestimated what proximity to Kimberly means.”

He’d voiced his own regrets and expressed sympathy. Pollock chewed that over, but Oliver’s hand was on the hilt of his athame.

“We’re past the point of settling this with words. If you agree, then you may draw at will.”

“…Argh!”

Regardless of what each wanted, their path was set. Realizing that, the Featherston leader drew, and Oliver did in kind. The next moment, they threw themselves into their reluctant duel.

It was over in less than five minutes.

"Uh, Featherston students, anyone still able to stand?"

"Doesn't look like it. Then victory goes to our Kimberly kids! Hooray!"

A soft round of applause went up from all corners of the restaurant.

"Only five minutes?" a Kimberly upperclassman scoffed, glancing at the pile of downed Featherstons. "I know you're a bunch of nerds, but try and tough it out a little longer."

"Nah, our juniors were just *that* good. All six fought well."

The victors were getting their share of praise. Guy, Pete, and Katie all had burns and bruises but were still standing. And the remaining three were completely unharmed.

None of their opponents had been especially skilled fighters, so the moment the three friends took control of the fray, this outcome had been inevitable. With their friends rampaging, Oliver, Chela, and Nanao had kept their involvement to a minimum.

"Good show. Head's up; moving the tables back!"

"And let's heal the losers up. If you were older, we'd be heaving you out the front door, got that?"

Spells flew, and tables and chairs were yanked back in place. Oliver had feared the customers would complain, but they just kept on eating, shrugging off the whole debacle. The kitchen had paid the entire brawl no heed at all, cooking away—a fracas like this was undoubtedly a regular occurrence.

"Hey, big guy, over here. Your lip's split. I dig the rough-and-ready approach myself, but you got a bit reckless in the back half."

"Oh…uh, I'm good, thanks," Guy said, shaking off the upperclassman.

He turned back toward his friends, the rush of battle already faded. He looked pretty repentant.

"…So, uh…sorry 'bout all that…"

"…I'm not sorry," Pete retorted, pursing his lips.

Oliver had to laugh. There was no point in yelling at anyone now. If anything, he was disappointed in himself for not putting a stop to things in the first place.

"I know… This is all my—"

"And I'm not letting *you* say it, either!" Pete snapped, knowing exactly where Oliver was going. He slapped a hand over his roommate's mouth, and now everyone was laughing.

"Fine, nobody's sorry," Katie said, putting her athame away. "…Besides, it made me feel better, in a way." She had a pretty big bruise on her cheek and wore a sheepish half smile. "Plus, I did my part this time! That's a good thing…I think."

This reminded them—shortly after they'd started here, an insult directed at Katie had prompted a brawl in a classroom. Unable to stand the abuse, Oliver had gone in swinging, and Guy and Nanao had backed him up; as a result, all three had been sent to detention. They'd been satisfied with their actions—but apparently, Katie had always regretted standing by.

"Ha-ha! Yeah, you sure didn't hold back out there," said Guy.

"Yep," Katie replied. "When the chips are down, I throw down."

Guy held up a fist, and Katie bumped it. A sight that reminded Oliver how much they'd all grown.

As they settled back down at their table, someone came over. They looked up to find a Featherston student, his head hanging low.

"……"

"…Mr. Pollock," Oliver said.

Pollock met his eyes for a second, then hung his head again.

"…I swear I didn't mean to start a fight. I didn't, but it was my side that started one. And honestly, I've clearly got a lot to learn."

He seemed pretty upset. Oliver had a lot of sympathy for that, so he nodded in kind.

Then Pollock looked up, his eyes landing on each in turn—especially the bespectacled boy, who was still clearly holding a grudge.

"But I do have a complaint. Everything after the fight started, we're good. But responding to some water to the face with a blast orb is blatantly overdoing it."

"……I'm not sorry," Pete said again, meeting Pollock's gaze. He was clearly not budging on that point.

There was a long silence. Then Pollock swayed slightly, still not recovered from the damage he'd taken. Chela glanced at a nearby empty chair.

"You're in no shape to stand," she said. "Feel free to pull up a seat."

"…Thanks, but no. I may have disgraced myself, but I am their leader. And I'm disinclined to embarrass my school any further."

With that dignified refusal, he forced himself to stand upright. Chela elected to respect that and said nothing further. This boy, too, was a mage.

They'd each said their piece, but before he left—he turned to the curly-haired girl.

"May I ask one thing? They called you Katie, right? Are you Katie Aalto?"

Caught off guard, her eyes went wide. She nodded, then frowned slightly.

"…Um, yes, it is…"

"…I thought so." Pollock put a hand to his brow and sighed. "Ms. Aalto, when I heard the daughter of pioneering activists had chosen to go to Kimberly, of all places…well, I had many thoughts on the decision to stay in an environment diametrically opposed to your ideals. It seems your choice has led you astray."

"……"

“Consider a transfer to Featherston before they corrupt you completely. Our principal will welcome you, I’m sure. Perhaps this is none of my business—but I mean it as a friendly warning. I pray you give it some thought.”

Groans echoed through the shop, and Pollock turned toward them.

“My friends are waking up. It’s time the losers left,” he said. “But don’t imagine this matter is settled. Featherston has long suffered at the hands of Kimberly tyranny. And there will be a price for that.”

His pride and competitive spirit palpable, the boy walked away. Oliver watched him go with a sigh.

“Seems we’ve soured relations with Featherston even further…”

“Who cares? They started it,” said Guy.

“Still…they’re not all wrong,” Katie added. “That one boy’s probably telling the truth about what Kimberly people have done to them…”

“But that’s not *our* fault,” Pete snapped. “He has no right to lump us in with everyone else.”

At this point the waiter brought the appetizer.

“Ah, it seems the first course has arrived,” Chela said. “It may not have been how we intended the evening to begin, but let’s try to enjoy the meal. No mage could fail to love the pot pie here.”

Everyone tucked in. The courses to come were so good they banished all other thoughts, and by the time the fabled pot pie arrived, even Katie was all smiles.

They’d taken their time eating and talking, so once they left the restaurant, the last traces of sunset had almost faded. The foot traffic had died down, and the town was slowly going to sleep.

“Time seems right,” Oliver said. “Let’s head to the broom launchpad.” No one argued with that.

You took off from a launchpad, stuck to the flight paths, and landed on the landing pads. To avoid midair collisions, Galatea flight was strictly regulated, and express permission was required to deviate from said regulations.

Oliver led the way, his friends trailing behind. But it wasn’t long before Katie caught up, walking by his side.

“…Oliver,” she said.

“Yes, Katie?”

He glanced her way and found her looking unusually grim.

“…Do you think…Kimberly’s corrupting me?” she asked.

“ ⎯ !”

He felt his mouth go dry. This was clearly prompted by what the Featherston students—especially Mr. Pollock—had said. And that concern was very real. No matter how much time she spent bucking Kimberly’s methods, it was impossible to just shake this accusation off.

They walked in silence for a moment as Oliver searched for the right words. Katie waited patiently.

"…Everyone's had to adapt to Kimberly's environment—it's not just you."

"……"

"But that doesn't mean Kimberly's swallowing you up. You're still you, Katie. At your core, you're exactly the same as the day we met."

He could say that with authority. Katie Aalto was still Katie Aalto.

That might not be a concern—but the future still was. If she could stay kind even after a year in that brutal hellscape, if that much time still *failed* to corrupt her—was it really the place for her?

"…But…," he started, "if you ever feel like you want to get out…"

He didn't want to say this, but nonetheless—he felt he had to. A friend wouldn't keep quiet here.

"……then I can't stop you. None of us have that right. Like Mr. Pollock said…a transfer to Featherston *is* an option."

"……!"

Katie flinched like she'd been shot through the heart.

She knew he was trying to be fair. Bottling up his own feelings and thinking about his friend's future—that was what Oliver Horn always did. A year with him had made that very clear, and she respected him for it.

But…that wasn't what she wanted to hear. She didn't want him to be fair or considerate. She wanted him to be selfish and try keeping her at Kimberly. She'd hoped—prayed—he would throw caution to the wind and tell her he didn't *want* her to go.

"……"

She was ashamed of that. It seemed so full of herself. Here she was blessed with a friend like him, yet she craved something more than that. That was stupid. She had no right. She hadn't earned that. She'd never laid a claim on him.

Then as her gaze drifted to her feet, she heard his voice again.

"…But if that happens…"

Her eyes turned toward him…and she saw his fists clenched tight. Oliver was staring up at the night sky, looking anguished.

"…it would really suck," he said. "I just know…I'd miss you a lot…"

The feelings he'd bottled up were now spilling out—a drop of what he really felt. And that was all it took to make Katie feel warm inside.

"…Like I'd ever do that!" she said. "Come *on*, Oliver!"

"Gah—?!"

Her glee drove her to slap him hard on the back. The surprise blow made him stumble.

"I told you before that I've made up my mind. I'm going to fight here at Kimberly. Maybe if I was at Featherston, I'd meet a lot of people who think like me…but that would just make me even weaker."

As she said it, she felt the storm in her heart dying down. *Ah*, she thought. *I got caught up in all these problems and lost track of where I started.*

“I remember now!” she said. “I never wanted to stick with like-minded people and feel secure. I wanted the exact opposite! I wanted to meet people who didn’t think anything like me, clash with them, get mad, cry—and find common ground. And there’s nowhere better for that than Kimberly! That’s why I love it!”

Katie’s hands were on her hips, her head held high. Oliver grinned, relieved to see no signs of regret in his friend.

Conscious of his eyes on her, she quickly got embarrassed and looked away.

“Maybe that’s dumb,” she admitted. “My parents were vehemently against it. I had to fight hard to get here. Argh! I’ve always talked big, but—!”

It was her turn for a surprise. Her hand was wrapped tight in something warm, and she slowly turned her eyes toward it.

“Er, um…Oliver…?”

He’d taken her hand as they walked—a smile on his lips and a tenderness in his gaze, like he’d spied a single flower growing in a wasteland.

“…You’re brilliant, Katie. Like a bright light.”

That was all he said. And that was all it took to shoot her down. She turned beet red. No one behind them was crass enough to say a word.

Five minutes later, they reached the launchpad. Each of them mounted their brooms. Oliver had been leading the way, but he moved to the rear of the group, letting Chela guide them through the skies.

“Flying at night is more dangerous than by daylight. Watch out for bird strikes and other accidents—”

“Oh?”

But as she launched into her spiel, a new voice interrupted. She flinched, recognizing it instantly.

“My, my, my. If it isn’t my beloved daughter and her companions!”

“Father?!”

They looked over their shoulders and found a man with the same ringleted hair as Chela—Theodore McFarlane. Seeing the shocked look on his daughter’s face, he shrugged.

“You look like you’ve seen a behemoth, Chela. Even I venture into town on occasion.”

“I’m not surprised you’re in town,” she said. “I’m surprised you’re back at all. When did you return?”

“A few days ago. I’ve been running here and there around the Union.”

That seemed to be as much explanation as he cared to give. Leaving the specifics of his journey a mystery, he turned toward the Azian girl.

“But this timing is fortuitous!” he declared. “Nanao, may I have a moment of your time? I was away during spring break and missed the chance to discuss your first year.”

“Mm? Me, not Chela?”

“I’d love to talk to my darling girl as well, but that will have to wait. If I put this talk off any longer, I’m sure she’d never let me hear the end of it.”

He stuck out his tongue at Chela.

“A laudable goal,” she said. “But we’re headed home. Can this discussion not take place at school?”

“It could if we have to, but…as a reward for all her hard work her first year abroad, I thought I’d buy her something nice. And doing that at the school shop would be rather shabby.”

It was hard to tell if he was joking. Chela glanced at Nanao—who was looking at someone else.

“Hrm,” Nanao began. “My concern is—”

Clearly, the boy in back was foremost in her mind. Chela didn’t even need to ask. Though Nanao had certainly enjoyed the views Galatea had to offer, her real joy had come from flying by Oliver’s side. She’d been in high spirits the whole way here. And if she stayed behind, she’d have to return without him.

“…Mm? Hmmmmmm. Mm-hmm!”

Theodore seemed to have picked up on this as well. He glanced from Nanao to Oliver and then clapped his hands together.

“…Very well! Young man—Mr. Horn, wasn’t it? What say you join us?”

“Huh?”

“Naturally, not for nothing. Accompany Nanao, and there’s a gift in it for you as well—and a few Kimberly secrets. I was quite a troublemaker in my time there. I know things.”

That was an odd carrot to dangle. Oliver wasn’t sure what to make of it, but Kimberly secrets certainly sounded tantalizing. Even just knowing the location of a secret room could be a big advantage over other students.

“…Chela.”

“…Have it your way,” the ringlet girl said to Oliver with a shrug. “No telling what madness he has planned, but if you’re both inclined to go with him, you’re free to do so.”

Chela wouldn’t presume to know her father’s exact intentions, but she could clearly sense he had inclinations of his own. Talking him out of it would be challenging, and if Oliver stayed behind, then Nanao’s wish would be granted.

With that settled, Oliver and Nanao got off their brooms, stepping away from the group.

“Okay, everyone,” Oliver said. “Sorry, but we’ll have to take our leave here. The two of us will be back later tonight.”

“That appears to be the case. We must part here.”

“S-sure…”

“Okay…”

“…I’ll be waiting in our room,” Pete replied, seeming rather cross.

Chela looked her father right in the eye. “Take good care of them, Father. Please.”

“But of course! Good night, my darling child.”

Theodore stepped up and kissed her on the brow. Then he turned with a flourish and joined Oliver and Nanao on the sidelines. Chela and the other four watched them go and, once they'd vanished into the darkness, flew off into the night sky themselves.

"Well, Nanao? How was your first year?" Theodore asked as they strolled through the darkened streets.

She folded her arms, considering it. "In a word: chaotic," she answered. "I would have died many times over were it not for my companions."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I'm relieved to hear it. My first year was much the same! Kimberly never changes."

Boisterous laughter might not be the typical reaction here, but he *was* a Kimberly instructor. Noting Oliver's silence, Theodore glanced his way.

"Garland tells me you and Nanao are blade bound, Mr. Horn."

"…Can't say I've heard that expression before."

"Just me waxing poetic. No need to be so uptight! I admit, I had not counted on anyone like you. I assumed my daughter would be the only one able to keep up with Nanao from the get-go."

He certainly was eyeing Oliver with great curiosity. This forced Oliver to reevaluate the situation—he hadn't been invited along merely to keep Nanao company. Theodore was *also* interested in Oliver. And that meant Oliver would have to watch his words.

"…I'm not sure I'm still a match for her. She's been improving at dizzying speeds."

"But you hardly spent the past year resting on your laurels. By all means, keep polishing those skills. We don't want Nanao losing motivation, do we?"

Oliver decided not to take the lead in conversation and instead stuck to noncommittal responses where he could. It would do him no good to come off as too interesting; best practice was acting solely as Nanao's plus one. Theodore was not one of Oliver's targets, but he was a faculty member and had close ties to Headmistress Esmeralda. Proper caution was warranted here.

Either he noticed Oliver wasn't feeling chatty or was simply not that curious—regardless, the ringlet man soon turned to Nanao and the broom on her back.

"I've heard you're doing great things on the broom, Nanao. But to think you would pick *that* broom."

"Ah, you mean Amatsukaze? As you can see, a fine partner."

She patted the handle, looking proud.

Theodore's mind seemed to drift into past memories. "I envy you more than you can know. Have you heard tell of the mage who once rode that broom?"

"In no great detail. Merely that she was quite skilled."

“That she was. Like you, everyone admired her. She was a dear friend.” His eyes turned to the night sky, as if peering back in time. “Chloe Halford. You should know her name, at least.”

The emotion in his voice was evident, causing the armor encasing Oliver’s heart to develop another steely layer. *You’re going to talk about her? Here, of all places?*

“An unexpected connection indeed,” said Nanao. “Where is she now?”

“Nowhere, I’m afraid. She’s…entered the demon registry. Isn’t that what people in your country say?”

Faced with Nanao’s ignorance, Theodore deliberately chose a foreign idiom—looking rather sad while doing so.

“Since her loss, that broom has accepted no other riders. Not me nor any other teacher. Even Emmy couldn’t tame it.”

“Emmy?”

“Esmeralda. The headmistress. She was our junior back then. How the times have changed! You have to laugh. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He threw back his head, guffawing like he was trying to banish the gloom. And from that point on, he was his usual dashing self.

“There you have it!” he said, wheeling back to Nanao. “Your broom is lucky to have found a rider like you. Amatsukaze, was it? A splendid name! Make sure you take good care of it.”

Nanao nodded promptly, and all discussion of the previous rider was abandoned. Oliver was secretly relieved but grew more anxious as Theodore led them around corner after corner.

“…Rather a twisted path you’re leading us on,” Oliver commented.

“You’ve already seen the main roads at daytime, yes? But here we are! Galatea at night! What an adventure.”

There was a mischievous grin on his face that gave Oliver yet another reason to keep his hackles raised. The man himself had said he was a troublemaker, and that was likely an understatement.

“Let’s talk about something spooky,” Theodore said. “This town’s had a rash of slashings, lately.”

The deeper they went, the dimmer the streetlights. They were now shrouded in darkness, in which anything could lurk. As if trying to match the mood, the ringlet man lowered his voice to a sinister whisper.

“The culprit has targeted no ordinaries—only mages. The injuries have not proved fatal, but there have been three victims since the month began. In each case—their dominant hand was severed at the wrist.”

Oliver winced. If this was a tall tale to frighten them, good. But if this was true, then it was no laughing matter. Assuming the worst, he said, “… The culprit has some skill in the sword arts, then?”

“Oh, much more than some. One of the three victims was a Galatea guard. That’s a post that demands significant skill. Not someone any old mad mage could take down.”

This was sounding worse by the second.

“And you’ve chosen to take a stroll at night with this trouble afoot?” Oliver asked reproachfully.

“Heh-heh-heh. A fair point, Mr. Horn. But must I remind you who it is you’re following?”

He swung around to face them, theatrically placing a hand to his chest.

“Exactly! I am Theodore McFarlane. Interim though I may be, I am nonetheless Kimberly faculty. No slasher’s mad swings will best me. If the fool attacks, I will strike him down! …Well? Feeling any better?”

Despite his spiel, the man himself seemed less than convincing. Oliver concluded they could not place too much faith in him—and then Nanao spoke up.

“Beg pardon, Lord McFarlane—who do you suppose *that* is?”

Her eyes were focused on a darkened alleyway. When the two males followed her gaze, they saw a figure wrapped in a dingy cloak, standing dead center, blocking the path. The figure wore a hat pulled low, obscuring their face.

Theodore snorted derisively. “…Who knows? A passing villager, no doubt.”

“Yet, they seem disinclined to let us pass…”

Oliver already had his hand on his athame. The figure felt far too out of place to be a mere passerby.

There was a soft whistle, like a gust of wind through a crack. Poised for a quick draw, Oliver saw the mystery figure’s knees bend—

“Nanao, incoming!”

Even as he cried a warning, their foe lunged forward. Oliver fired a lightning spell, but they dodged to one side, feet touching the wall. Pacing never slacking for an instant, they sped past Nanao, perpendicular to her—and as they passed, a flash of steel came from beneath the cloak.

“Ngh—!”

This was an angle of attack she had never faced before, but her parry was instantaneous. Sparks flew as their blades collided. The enemy finished their wall run, landing six yards away, and turned back to face them.

This exchange had turned Oliver’s expression even grimmer. Using gravity control to let yourself run across vertical surfaces was a Lanoff technique known as Wall Walk. He could use it himself, but to *start* with that in a three-on-one battle was a bold move. Their foe was either unusually confident or did not value their own life.

“My, my,” Theodore said. “Speak of the devil…”

He drew his athame with aplomb. Oliver would have preferred he jump in on the first exchange, but perhaps the man was just that poised.

“Step back, please,” Theodore ordered. “I’ll handle him. Foul fiend who disrupts the town’s peace! You have the honor of facing *me*.”

He struck a stance—perhaps not surprisingly, the same Rizett style favored by Chela. Oliver and Nanao retreated behind him, watching

carefully. The slasher was not to be trifled with, but more importantly, this was a rare chance to observe a Kimberly instructor in action.

Oliver heard that whistling wind again. The foe stepped forward, not hesitating to enter the one-step, one-spell range. Oliver gulped. Once again, it seemed this opponent was disinclined to use any spells.

For a moment, they stared each other down.

“Hahhh!”

Then both blades swung. Theodore used a downward strike, aiming for the arm, his blow as swift and true as befit a Kimberly instructor, easily besting—

“…Hmm?”

But when the strikes were done, it was Theodore’s wrist that sliced open, red blood seeping forth.

Silence settled over the darkened alley. The ringlet man looked down at the gouge in his wrist, then grinned.

“Run!”

He spun around and dashed toward the two second-years. Oliver blinked once, but he and Nanao quickly turned and gave chase.

“Wha—?! Wait! I thought you had this!”

“So did I! But this is a time for survival, not vanity!” There wasn’t a trace of shame in Theodore’s tone. A moment later, he sensed danger closing in and let out a most undignified shriek. “Augh! They’re after us!”

Of course they are, Oliver thought. He threw an explosion spell over his shoulder, hoping to delay their pursuer, but it caught nothing but pavement. Running the wrong way, his aim was hardly true, and an opponent this skilled was not exactly a sitting duck. They could up the number of shots, but Nanao’s athame was two-handed and not meant for casting to the rear.

“Why aren’t *you* casting? That cut isn’t *that* deep!” Oliver yelled, hoping Theodore would be of *some* use.

The man just shook his head. “I’d love to, but the tendon’s severed! I can’t move it, and it hurts like hellfire!”

Oliver had suspected as much, so he didn’t take it too hard. Theodore was clearly going to be of no help whatsoever. Then Nanao spoke up.

“We cannot escort this foe to populated territory! We must turn and fight, Oliver.”

“…That seems to be the only option.”

He nodded and stopped, turning to face their pursuer. The slasher stopped as well, athame at the ready.

“Careful!” Theodore cautioned. “That was no ordinary blow! Else I would not have been harmed!”

“…I’ve got my doubts about the latter claim, but at least we can agree on the former.”

Oliver let a bit of sarcasm slip, but he was also sure Theodore’s wound had not been caused entirely by carelessness on his part. Oliver, too, sensed

that something had been off about that blow. The advantage in timing and speed had been Theodore's, and by all rights—he should have won.

Nanao had seen it, too. And yet, she'd chosen to fight. For the first time, she addressed their assailant.

"I see you are of some skill," she said. "I am Hibiya Nanao, a warrior born of Yamatsukuni, Tourikueisen. Might I know your name?"

Recognizing their skill, she honored them as a fellow warrior, and thus, requested their name with not a trace of ill will—yet no voice responded.

"…They can't answer, Nanao. See the mouth?"

"Hmm."

Oliver had spotted the cause moments before. The streetlight behind had reached just far enough beneath the hat.

And what lay beneath—were lips *sewn shut*. A mouth sealed so that no voice could emerge.

Realization dawned—this foe hadn't been avoiding spells. They *couldn't* chant anything. Oliver also realized that whistling wind sound was coming from the throat below those sewn lips—the sound of their breath. They'd opened a breathing hole in their neck to replace the mouth they'd sealed.

While not exactly *sane*, Oliver could fathom the intent. Sewing the lips meant sealing their casting, forcing them to hone their blade skills—there was historical precedent for this method of training. To overcome the limitations of one's sword art skills, trainees cast aside their reliance on magic, driving themselves into a corner. The practitioner before them had taken these extreme measures.

Naturally, this was not an approach anyone had done in modern times. The effectiveness of it alone was questionable, and to a mage, abandoning magic was like abandoning breathing. If any capacity for thought remained, this individual would never have chosen such a deranged approach. And that meant…

"…They've been consumed by the spell. No longer in their right mind," Oliver said. The only reasonable conclusion from the evidence before him.

"…That much is readily apparent," Nanao replied, nodding. "Yet, I felt no murk upon their blade."

Despite their dire circumstances, that made him laugh. He should have known. It mattered not to her if their foe was sane or mad—that was but a triviality.

"Oliver, might I have the honors?"

"…This won't be easy."

"I am aware. But it seems our foe desires a duel."

Nanao's eyes were on the slasher. She did not need words to read their intent. To know this foe had the clarity of purpose achieved only with madness.

Consensus achieved, she stepped forward.

“Careful, Nanao,” Theodore warned. “When they cut me, I knew that blow was downright bizarre. I have no clue how I could have blocked it—no, worse.”

He paused, weighing his next words.

“I don’t even know *how* he cut me. It might be…a spellblade.”

A terrifying notion. But even with this dire portent, Nanao never wavered.

“The warning is appreciated. But I highly doubt that.”

She seemed awfully certain. Oliver held his breath, watching as the Azian girl stepped into range, katana raised high.

“We have waited enough. Have at thee!”

The only response was a hiss of breath. There followed several seconds of stifling silence—then both shadows moved as one.

“Hahhh!”

Blades clashed, and sparks flew. The furious sword dance alone drove back the darkness of the night. As Oliver stared, unblinking, Theodore moved to his side.

“It begins,” the ringlet man said. “What’s your take, Mr. Horn?”

The boy frowned. Theodore’s tone and energy were noticeably different from a moment before. There was a fire in his eyes as he absorbed the battle. Suspicions rising, Oliver answered carefully.

“…It’s heavily modified, but the base is Rizett. They’re quite good. Seems they favor avoiding the offensive, keeping up the pressure, and aiming for the moment their opponent retreats.”

“Good eye. Anything else?”

Was this a test? Oliver watched the slasher closely a moment, mulling over his next words.

“…They’re injured. Likely the chest and leg. Perhaps they fought someone before us… Either way, they’re not in peak condition.”

He spoke with conviction. The slasher’s techniques were obviously polished, yet beneath that surface lay oddly sluggish, off-balanced movements. Reason enough to assume their wounds were not fully healed.

“If you can spot that, I have nothing to add,” Theodore said, sounding impressed. “How would you fight them?”

“Keep calm, don’t back down, parry and counter.”

“A model Lanoff reply. And you’ve got the confidence to follow through.”

Then the man’s voice lowered a notch further. “And Nanao?”

Given his previous analysis, Oliver didn’t even need to think.

“…If her opponent were in peak condition, perhaps things would have been different,” he said.

This was not a foe to be trifled with. Without the handicap, they’d be a match for most Kimberly upperclassmen. The fact that they’d lasted this long against Nanao *with* the injuries proved it. Yet—

“She’ll cut straight in. Their blade is no match for her.”

He knew her strength better than anyone; there wasn't a shadow of doubt in his mind.

As they watched, the slasher lost ground, unable to withstand the force of Nanao's blows. There, her unrelenting offense halted. Just outside the one-step, one-spell range, the slasher waited—clearly trying a different tactic.

"They seem to have reached the same conclusion."

"…Then the time for talk is over," Oliver said.

This was the turning point—if anything strange were to happen, it would be here.

The blow that had cut Theodore's sword hand—this foe had yet to use that move on Nanao. This was unquestionably the moment for it. They stood no chance otherwise—which forced their hand.

But Theodore's voice broke the silence.

"Four hundred years since the foundation of sword arts."

"?"

He spoke not to Oliver. This was more of a monologue.

"As style after style rose and declined, techniques deepened, giving birth to the six secret spellblades. Yet, even now, there is no end to claims on a seventh."

"……."

"Your foe here has sewn his mouth, been consumed by the spell, lived for the sword alone, and given birth to a technique all his own. He demands only to know if it can be parried or dodged." Theodore then continued: "His life is devoted to that inquiry, Nanao. Show us your answer."

He wasn't even trying to hide his expectation and excitement. One look at that, and it struck Oliver like a bolt of lightning—*this* was Theodore's goal. Everything the man had done tonight was to bring about this very moment!

"—Hahh!"

From a high stance, Nanao stepped in, unleashing a bamboo splitter. The sheer speed and power of it need hardly be explained. The slasher moved in response, but his motion was clearly fatally slow. Anyone could tell Nanao's blow would land first.

Exactly as Theodore's was supposed to.

" ⎯ !"

Before Oliver's eyes, Nanao's strike moved at unnatural speeds—*faster* than she intended. *Too fast.* A blow meant to strike an advancing enemy, timed to their step into range—struck ahead of schedule, striking naught but air.

The sewn lips twisted in celebration of victory. Her missed swing left her wrist exposed, and his blade was closing in—

" ⎯⎯ ?"

The slasher could not believe his eyes.

The girl had swung downward from a high stance… He'd been sure of it —the swing faster than she expected, passing harmlessly an inch from his nose…as he planned.

But…if that had actually happened…

Why was her katana at chest height? Why had it not been swung?

" Hmph."

Now her blade fell. Right at the slasher's wrist, this time for real.

His athame and the hand gripping it fell to the ground, severed. A moment later, blood gushed forth. Staining the pavement below.

" "

The pain forgotten, he gaped up at her. She stood unmoved, her eyes so clear it spoke more than any words could have—to his defeat.

"The loss is yours, slasher," a man's voice said.

The slasher had neither the means nor the will to resist the blow that followed. He promptly lost consciousness.

"You never fail to astonish, Nanao," Theodore said, athame in hand. The electric bolt he'd cast had left the slasher prone at her feet.

"…I thought your tendon was severed," Oliver said, glaring at him.

"I must have imagined it. Once I tried, it moved just fine!"

The instructor merely replied with an offhanded comment. Oliver lost all desire to argue the point. Moreover, Theodore wasn't even looking at him—he had eyes only for the Azian girl.

"First, if I might ask—you knew the trick going in?"

"The details were lost on me," Nanao replied, sheathing her katana. "But I knew the gist. 'Twas a move designed to throw off one's timing."

Theodore put his hand to his lips but failed to hide the smile behind it.

"The gist, hmm?" he said. "Fascinating. Simply fascinating. Mr. Horn, what do you make of it?"

He lobbed the question Oliver's way when least expected. The boy made no attempt to hide his look of suspicion but turned his focus back to the defeated foe.

"…Read an opponent's stance, predict the path their blade will follow, and if within the range of spatial magic, control the gravity and quality of the air in said path. Momentarily accelerate the opponent's strike, allowing it to pass harmlessly, creating an opportunity for a counter. Something along those lines?"

Seeing it twice was enough to draw that conclusion. Spatial magic affected an area close at hand, creating limited magical effects without the need for a chant. The slasher had employed a high-level variation thereof.

Mages could only use spatial magic within range—effectively a magical variant on the concept of personal space. Just as Nanao used it to control the power within her body, a skilled mage could meddle with a variety of forces within their spatial territory.

Gravity and momentum were powerful examples but were rarely used in actual combat—for the simple reason that controlling them required great skill, and in most cases, the results achieved were not worth the effort.

For instance, imagine you strengthened the gravity in the space before your eyes, momentarily slowing the enemy's movements. Even if that aim succeeded, would you be able to attack much faster?

Of course not. The mana diverted to gravity control was simply that much less magic coursing through your body. And since physical enhancement was more cost effective than gravity control, even *with* the gravity-based deceleration, your opponent would *still* be moving faster. Lowering gravity to speed yourself up would fare no better. Controlling either was a waste of magic—that was the common perception all sword arts practitioners shared.

But by shifting the concept, the slasher's move had upended that notion. Oliver found himself genuinely impressed at the artistry of it.

"Neither speeding yourself up nor slowing your foe down. Speeding up your enemy's attack, forcing them to *miss*. The idea hits a blind spot. Versatile and flexible, it's definitely a viable technique," Oliver continued. "Though the skills involved may be too high level to be easily reproduced."

"My, excellent theorizing. I see why you make such a good pair."

Theodore had his arms folded, nodding repeatedly.

"His ignorance of Nanao's swordcraft proved his undoing," Oliver explained. "Sight unseen, how would he know that Yamatsu's two-handed blades can cut a man with the wrists alone—no need to swing the arms."

The slasher had bet everything on the move they'd developed, and to fight against it, Nanao had started with arms held high, and swung them down—*without* swinging her sword. Her arms moved to chest height, but the tip of her blade remained pointed skyward. In other words—she'd simply shifted from a high stance to a middle one.

The slasher had expected her to swing and miss, there—but instead, she unleashed her *actual* swing a beat delayed. Yamatsu katana grips were long, allowing space between the hands clenched round it. And that space had proved key. Push the right hand forward, and pull the left hand back, and the principle of leverage meant that small motion could produce dramatic movement at the sword's tip. She'd cut the man's hand off with her wrists alone.

Adding nothing to Oliver's explanation, Nanao kept her eyes on the downed man. Despite her triumph, there was no smile on her face—regret was clearly winning out.

"His skill was worthy. A shame he was injured," she said.

A flicker of repentance crossed Theodore's visage. "Yes, right you are… There was no need for all *that*."

Oliver didn't let that mutter go unmissed. He swung round, his eyes like daggers stabbing the man—who ignored him completely.

“Well, I’d better haul this slasher to the authorities. I’m sure they’ll have endless questions, and there’s no need to rope the two of you into *that* mess. We’d better part here,” said Theodore. “Oh, don’t worry, I won’t steal your credit. I’ll make sure the guards hear all about your exploits. In return, promise me you won’t tell my daughter I stood idly by.”

He held a finger to his lips. Oliver deepened the furrow on his brow in protest.

“……”

“Ha-ha-ha, don’t be so vexed. I’ll make it up to you in due time, I swear.”

Theodore patted the boy on the shoulder. Oliver clenched his fists but then turned away.

“…Fine. We’ll take our leave,” he replied. “C’mon, Nanao.”

“Oh?”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her away. It was rare for him to be that forceful, and she gave him a look of some surprise.

“What’s wrong, Oliver? You seem downright irate.”

“Of course I am. You know why, too. He tricked you into that fight.”

But even as he spoke, Oliver was well aware that she knew this and just didn’t mind. Theodore, meanwhile, had known she wouldn’t mind and taken advantage of the fact. *That* was what infuriated Oliver.

“Don’t trust that man,” he cautioned. “He’s one of the many sorcerers dwelling in Kimberly’s depths.”

Theodore McFarlane’s clown act disguised the nature of his madness. And that certainty was what prompted Oliver’s warning.

Left alone with the unconscious slasher, the Kimberly instructor stared into the darkness after his students, scratching his head.

“…Perhaps I was a bit too obvious. He’ll be holding a grudge against me now. But be that as it may…”

He turned on his heel, drawing his athame before moving to the slasher’s side. Athame in hand, he cast a spell on the severed wrist, leading it over to the arm—and then fused it back in place with a healing spell.

The treatment was over in minutes, and he followed with a low-grade lightning spell, jolting the slasher awake.

“Arise, slasher. I assume you’re not yet satisfied?”

The slasher bounded to his feet, then moved the once-severed hand about, ensuring it was in full working order. Then he looked to the man before him.

“My apologies. The price of your participation in that little farce was a glimpse of the *real thing*, wasn’t it?” Theodore said. “Nanao’s progress defied my expectations. It seems you were unable to even corner her.”

The slasher didn’t budge. Theodore shrugged, chuckling.

“But fear not. Our bargain stands,” he continued, his smile fading. “I am a man of my word.”

He struck a mid-stance—the Rizett style, like his daughter.

“Do your worst. You will not regret it.”

The ferocity in his glare was a mere courtesy. But it was enough to still his opponent's trepidations. For a third time, the sewn-mouth slasher staked his life upon the technique he'd crafted.

Among the stories shared by nonmagical folk is the legend of the doppelgänger.

Originating in Daitsch, the story is a simple one:

A man arrives home one day, and his wife asks him the strangest thing: "Why did you come in twice?" The man is most perplexed.

From that day on, similar events occur. He meets an old friend for the first time in ages only to be told they met yesterday. He encounters a total stranger and is accused of having insulted them. He goes to a new location and is told they've seen him there before.

As these oddities pile up, the man's state of mind declines. All he can think about is this other version of himself. His wife leaves him when he is unable to work.

Just as things can't seem to get any worse, he wanders in a daze through the market—and at last sees it with his own two eyes. A man coming toward him, the spitting image of himself—height, face, even the clothes.

No use running. His mind made up, the man heads straight for his double. As they near, the double grins.

The two of them collide head-on. A burst of light erupts, blinding all witnesses.

Then when the light fades and their vision returns—they find the man's body in pieces. Two of each limb, one torso and head—all the pieces together make *only one corpse*.

Far more gruesome *true* stories abound in the world of magic, although we can safely assume the bulk of this legend is fiction.

But magically speaking, the phenomenon described is possible. It could be the prank of a ghost or a fairy, or an illusion used by an ill-tempered mage to trick the ordinaries. However—there is reason to think the roots lie deeper.

There is a real event that could be the basis of the legend—the result of a magical experiment recorded in ancient documents.

Once there was a mage living in northern Daitsch. Busy with the pursuit of sorcery, he lamented the lack of research assistance until one day a thought struck him. Why was there only *one* of him? Why not *two*?

Perhaps a ludicrous thought born from lack of sleep, but he was quite serious about it. Mages and ordinary folk have very different concepts of self. Surpassing the boundaries of your flesh is an instinct all mages share. At the heart of his attempt lay the notion that it was a trivial concern how *many* of him there were—at least, that's what he assumed.

Not one to waste time, the mage set about the task. After much trial and error, he made an attempt. Specifically, he projected half of his proportional existence two feet in front of him, within the range of spatial magic—itself essentially an extension of his body's interior. The mental image was rather

like shifting his left foot's center of gravity to a right foot placed in front of him—except done at the plane of his very being.

The results were a failure—and a spectacular one.

In other words: a *massive explosion*. One that took out his manor and the surrounding land.

It is said that the doppelgänger myth is the result of nonmagical people hearing the tale of this astounding experiment and embellishing it over time. Its popularity among ordinary folk—and no one else—lends credence to this notion, resolving the mystery of the tale's origin.

But to mages, a much bigger mystery remained. Why had the man failed?

Naturally, mages are hardly dissuaded by the explosive death of a predecessor. The experiment was replicated a number of times. Movement of the proportional existence was itself exceedingly difficult, so few of the early mages even managed to reproduce the failure—but as those reproductions stacked up, analysis of the phenomenon progressed.

Some sixty years after the initial explosion, a consensus was achieved. Namely: The experiment's failure was inevitable. The world simply did not allow two of the same thing to exist.

What happened at the moment of the explosion? *Convergence.* Divvying the proportional existence into two selves resulted in the lesser self being drawn into the greater one. They simply joined up. But the force of this was too great for the body to bear. The mage making the attempt exploded, and the energy unleashed sent shock waves into the vicinity.

This was an example of a frenetic principle—a term for *clearly excessive* corrections that occurred when mages violated the rules of the world. As if some higher power was offended and ruthlessly punished the mage for their sin. A strong argument for staying the hell away.

But even with that much established, mages never learn.

Far from the start of all this and a considerable time later…

To the Union's west, in southern Yelgland, a mage from an old bloodline read the conclusions of the Daitschian mage's sixty-year study and thought, *Hmm. As long as that principle exists, it may be difficult to maintain two of myself.*

But then he looked at it from a different angle. The two selves converge, generating tremendous force. Could that force have other uses?

If the explosion was the result of an inability to contain the force—then all you had to do was be strong enough to *control* it.

First, face forward. Move slightly more than 50 percent of his proportional existence to the far limit of his spatial magic.

Thus creating a second Theodore—a forbidden double. Convergence began instantly. An inescapable correction, merging the two back into one, hitting the original Theodore like a tremendous tailwind.

He didn't *have* to move a muscle. A step ahead was another Theodore with a greater proportional existence—and the rules of the world agreed that *that* was where he *belonged*.

"▁ !"

He need merely focus on surviving it. In keeping the incredible force from destroying him.

Unfathomable energy coursed through him, all of it supplementing his mana circulation. He knew this was a feat like coursing supersonic mercury through his veins. One slip of control and he would wind up like the failed experiments of centuries past.

But if he did not fail?

The result was a blow none could withstand, delivered without so much as a flick of his blade.

The second spellblade—Creumbra, the self-racing shadow.

As the two shadows merged, everything above the slasher's waist was rendered a bloody mist.

"*That's* a real one," Theodore McFarlane growled.

The duel was over, and no one was left to hear those words. His hand held his athame aloft as if he had just thrust it forward…but no stab could result in *this*.

When Theodore's spellblade hit the slasher, the man's upper body was reduced to particles too small for the eye to see. The blow did not pierce—it evaporated. The forced convergence of two identical beings, the world correcting an error—when controlled and focused into an attack, this was the result.

Theodore brushed the charred smoke from his suit. The slasher's legs toppled over, as if just realizing they were dead.

"My apologies," Theodore murmured. "Perhaps I got a bit too worked up."

He looked down at his blade hand. It had been trembling since before their battle began, since he'd witnessed the Azian girl's fight. A dark joy roiled up within, a high he could not control.

"Ah, I cannot wait. I cannot wait, Nanao, my little sunshine," he moaned. "Please, don't stop. Run ever forward—until you're where I am."

A giddy monologue. He bit his lip, drawing blood. He bared his canines, his ringlets shaking—like the mane of a raging lion.

"I swore an oath to Chloe…and you must deliver on it!"

His cry echoed through the night. The warlock's frenzied lamentations shook the canopy over Galatea.

CHAPTER 4

Games of the Sky

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Games of the Sky

When delving into the labyrinth, parties of five or six were highly encouraged. But if you could stomach the fact that no friends would be there to save you, there were benefits to solo runs.

For one, it was easier to hide yourself. In a group, there was just that much more noise to stifle. Where a group might be discovered and forced into combat, a solo explorer could often weather the crisis. Even if found, the lack of encumbrance increased the odds of a successful escape.

"……"

In fact, Oliver was currently using a camouflage spell to disguise himself as part of the wall, waiting for a group of students to pass by.

The labyrinth's first layer had the most foot traffic, and that could often lead to trouble. Deceiving other mages was even more important than beasts or ghosts. And depending on the mage, that could be rather challenging. A simple disguise might be enough for second-years—like this passing group—but against a skilled upperclassman, more advanced stealth techniques were a must… Although in that case, it was best to just turn around and head in the other direction.

"…Whew."

Once they were a safe distance away, he released the spell and set out once more. There were three key rules for traversal without backup: maintain a safe distance, don't get reckless, and minimize time spent. By following all three rules strictly, Oliver could currently manage the top two layers on his own.

He kept this up until he reached his destination. He stood before a blank stretch of wall and said the password. The blocks shifted, forming a door—one of the first layer's many hidden entrances.

"…Sorry I'm la—"

As he stepped in, someone grabbed him by his shoulders. Pale-golden hair—his "sister," Shannon Sherwood, now a sixth-year. Looking very intense, she was inspecting every inch of him.

"Stand still, Noll."

"Wh-what's this about…?" he stammered.

His cousin Gwyn's voice echoed from the back. "Leave her to it. She's been concerned about your condition. You've not been yourself since the Ophelia thing, right?"

Oliver winced. He'd known he couldn't hide it from them, but this was the first time they'd actually brought it up.

Shannon finished her fervent inspection and blinked at him.

“…Huh? …You’re all…better…” She peered into his eyes, and he gulped, feeling an arrow to his heart. “You…had it taken care of? Who…?”

“ __ !”

“Ohhh?” Gwyn said, rubbing his hands together. As Oliver squirmed out of Shannon’s grasp, his brother insisted, “Don’t you run, Noll! No secrets from us. What’re you getting from him, Shannon?”

“…Turmoil. He’s blaming…himself… And…*lots* of self-hatred. But also… affection. He doesn’t…resent this person.”

Shannon proceeded to straight up plow the depths of his heart. Oliver clenched his jaw. He’d known there was no point trying to hide. She always knew what he was feeling.

Gwyn folded his arms, thinking. “So someone close caught him by surprise? …Gotta be one of the kids in his core group, then.”

That was enough information for anyone to narrow down potential candidates. When his little brother still refused to speak, Gwyn shot him a soft smile.

“Don’t get upset. I’m surprised you’ve let anyone get that close; it’s actually a good thing,” he insisted. “You *know* you’d never have let us handle the problem.”

“…Hrmph…”

Shannon spun around and headed into the back room. Gwyn watched her go, then pointed after her.

“See? She’s sulking now. Go let her fuss over you!”

Oliver did, of course. He found her standing at the sink, her back to him —and couldn’t think what to say. All he managed was a faint whisper.

“Um, Sis…”

“Sit. I’m…making tea.”

He did as he was told. Feeling awful, he moved to the table, and Gwyn took a seat across from him.

“Just to be sure,” his brother said, “you *did* use protection?”

“…Didn’t do anything that would require that.”

“Hmm. So they just nibbled at you?”

Oliver made a face at the euphemism, but that sort of talk was standard at Kimberly. He knew full well he was the touchy one here, so he left his gripes unsaid, sitting in sullen silence—until there was a thump behind him. He jumped, turning toward the noise.

“……?!”

“Oh, nothing to worry about. If you’re curious, go pry it open.”

There was a wooden box in the corner. Gwyn waved him to it, and Oliver gingerly approached, lifting the lid.

“…Zzzz…zzz…”

“……”

There was a girl in the box, curled up like a cat. His covert operative— Teresa Carste.

“She says she feels…safest there. Just…leave her be, okay?” Shannon asked, eyes on her tea prep.

Oliver had a *lot* of questions but didn’t want to disturb the girl’s slumber. He carefully closed the lid and went back to the table.

“She’ll wake up soon enough. Let’s get these frying.”

Gwyn hopped up and moved to the stove in the corner. He lit the fire with his wand and put a frying pan on top. When it was warm enough, he cooled the bottom with a spell, and once he was sure the temperature was completely even, he poured in the contents of a bowl that had been left on a nearby shelf.

A sweet scent filled the room. Oliver sniffed.

“Pancakes…?”

“You want one, Noll?”

But before Oliver could answer, the box lid popped open, pushed upward by a girl’s head. She stretched—very catlike.

“Good morning, my lord.”

“…Morning, Ms. Carste.”

Greetings exchanged, Teresa came over and sat down at the table with him. After several seconds of silence, he decided he had to ask.

“…Why a box?”

“I find dark, cramped places relaxing.”

“…It doesn’t take its toll on you, physically?”

“I am in peak condition.”

Her stoic responses drove home the fact that this was just what she always did. While Oliver tried to figure out if he should say anything else, Gwyn came over with a steaming plate.

“All done! Use all the syrup you like.”

He pulled the syrup bottle close and put the fresh pancake in front of Teresa. The very color of her eyes changed.

Shannon brought the tea over and whispered in Oliver’s ear. “Don’t…be alarmed, Noll…”

“Mm…?”

As he blinked, Teresa poured a *lot* of syrup onto her plate, then reached out, grabbed the pancake with both hands (heedless of how sticky they got), and bit in.

“ — Uh…”

This was not how he’d expected her to eat. It was extremely… carnivorous. Sensing his surprise, Teresa glanced up at him, licking syrup off her fingers.

“…Something amiss, my lord?”

“…Wh-why bare-handed?”

“It’s faster.”

“But…your hands get dirty…”

“I can simply wash them,” she replied, a baffled expression on her face.

Unable to think of any further arguments, he looked up at Gwyn, who shrugged.

“Side effect of her covert upbringing. We’ve mentioned it before, but… she won’t budge.”

“…How do you eat during school hours?”

“Not a concern. I don’t eat with anyone else.”

She dug into her pancake again. At least she seemed to be aware that this was not fit for the public eye. The fact that she was eating like this here was because all three people present were close enough to count as private.

Still, he thought. Not eating with anyone else? As in, she doesn’t eat in public at all?

“……”

That wasn’t something he could let slide. After a long moment of contemplation, he turned to his brother again.

“…Can I ask for two more?”

“Coming right up!”

Catching his drift, Gwyn headed back to the kitchen. Oliver turned back to the girl.

“Ms. Carste, stop for a second.”

Teresa paused, returning her half-eaten pancake to the plate.

“…That’s an order?”

“It is. And go wash your hands.”

Figuring half measures would get him nowhere, he deliberately chose a harsh tone. She rose mechanically and moved to the sink. Once her hands were clean, she returned, and the pair sat in silence a few minutes until Gwyn brought two plates over. One was for Oliver; the other was placed in front of Teresa.

“Now I’ll teach you table manners,” Oliver said. “You’ll eat the new pancake per my instructions.”

“To what purpose?”

“To instill behavior appropriate for my covert operative. Save further questions until we’re done.”

With that, he put his knife in his right hand and his fork in his left. A flicker of a smile crossed his lips—he remembered teaching Nanao the same thing a year ago.

“There’s a marked difference between individual nutritional acquisition and eating around a table with others. For the former, you need only fill your belly, but with the latter, the meal is a means by which to relate to those with you. To prolong the social act, you want to avoid eating too quickly; and keeping things tidy will make a good impression on your peers.”

Oliver was cutting his pancake into bite-size pieces. Nanao had merely been unfamiliar with foreign table manners; Teresa, meanwhile, was familiar yet rejected them. It was a rational, efficient decision in light of her role and lifestyle, but it was a bit too extreme for her current position.

“There’s no need to tie your every action to your mission,” he said. “I think it’s a shame to miss out on the social opportunities life brings. Especially since you’re a student now.”

“My current approach has yet to cause any issues.”

“Are you sure?”

Teresa frowned at that, which proved Oliver was right to be concerned. He sighed. She was definitely not making friends.

“I’m aware you’ve received no training for this…but if you’re going to attend Kimberly as a student, it’s a problem if you can’t blend in. What I’m teaching you will help you avoid unwanted attention and make your life here seem normal. I’m speaking both as a fellow student and as your lord, here.”

He let that sink in a moment.

“And to start with, you’ll dine with me. We don’t want these pancakes getting cold, do we?”

“…Understood.”

She nodded emotionlessly and picked up her silverware. He’d explained the basis behind his orders hoping to convince her of the logic involved, but her poker face gave him no insight into how successful that had been.

He sliced off a bite-size piece of pancake, and Teresa copied him. One eye on that, he made conversation.

“My brother’s pancakes are something else, aren’t they? Do you have a sweet tooth?”

“Sugar converts quickly to energy.”

“It does, but we hardly go around sucking down rock candy, do we? What do you make of the coloring?”

He pointed at the fried surface of the cake. Teresa stared at it a moment, thinking.

“…It looks like a fox’s pelt.”

“Right, and every bit as consistent. Unless the pan’s surface temperature is completely even, you get a much more mottled look. He’s taken extra time and effort to make your dining experience enjoyable.”

Oliver shot his brother a quick glance and got a smile in return.

“The batter shows extra care as well. You’d never get this consistency just by mixing milk and eggs into store-bought flour. I can tell he’s stirred in a meringue, but I could never make it melt in your mouth like this. There must be some other secret,” he deduced. “And this pancake is crafted so that it tastes better when cut into bite-size pieces. Compare eating it like this to your handheld approach. You can tell the difference, right?”

She took another bite, considering it.

“……Mm……”

That sounded like she *could* tell the difference—and she started eating faster. Oliver concluded that she’d never been taught to *enjoy* her food.

“And taking a sip of tea between bites refreshes your taste buds. When you go back to the pancakes, the flavor will be as striking as it was the first

time. So there's meaning to the beverage pairing, as well. Your tea isn't just a liquid for clearing your clogged throat."

Teresa heeded this advice, following a sip of tea with another bite.

"……!"

Her eyes went wide. Pancakes had a very simple flavor, and that could easily grow dull halfway through; strong-brewed tea was an effective palate cleanser. Something everyone else knew from experience—but her operative training had kept her mealtime to a bare minimum.

"……"

And that upbringing had all been so she could serve him. That fact had never sat well with Oliver—but then her eyes turned toward him, gleaming with the thrill of new discovery. For once, she looked her age—perhaps far younger.

"……I could eat this *forever*."

"Precisely," Oliver replied, stifling his emotions. Now was not the time for self-reproach. "My sister brewed the tea extra strong to match the sweetness of the syrup, something you might not notice from shoveling it in…and manners dictate we take the time to appreciate the care she took."

Teresa was still a little clumsy with the knife and fork, but she was thoroughly absorbed in her meal.

"I've learned three things about you today," Oliver said, smiling. "You prefer a practical approach, have a sweet tooth, and show your true self while enjoying fine food. Quite a productive meal."

"……!"

Teresa paused, mid-slice. For the first time, she realized her observation subject was observing her right back.

"There's a crumb on your cheek. Turn toward me."

"…I-I'll get it," she said, raising her arm to her face. He stopped her.

"Wiping with your sleeve would be a faux pas. Must I make this an order?"

She froze, and he cleaned her up with his handkerchief—gently wiping her mouth and cheeks, careful not to hurt her. She had her eyes closed and was turning rather red.

"All better now. By the way, do you own a mirror?"

"…No. Not much use on duty."

"Then take this one."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a hand mirror. The one he always used.

"Mirrors allow you to check your appearance and gauge how others see you. Keep this on you and be mindful of that."

He held it out. She reflexively accepted it with both hands and then examined her face in its reflection.

"…Thank you very much," she said with utmost formality. She put the mirror in her pocket and went back to her pancakes. Eating even faster than before, she quickly polished off the rest. When she was done, she

turned back to Oliver, but for a long moment, she couldn't meet his gaze. At last she asked, "…Is the meal over?"

"Yes, that's enough for now. Join me again sometime."

He smiled at her, and she nodded, then stood up. As she slipped behind him, she whispered, "…Just say the word, and I am there."

When he turned back to her—she was gone. He scanned his surroundings but could find no traces of her presence.

"…Where'd she go?"

"The rafters. I think she hit peak embarrassment."

Gwyn pointed, and Oliver looked up.

"She's a born operative. Great at observing people but not at all accustomed to being observed. Your conversation here was uncharted territory."

That explained a lot. She'd abruptly changed her demeanor before, and in hindsight, that had always been prompted when she herself became the object of conversation. Grasping this principle alone deepened his understanding of her.

As he finished Shannon's tea, more and more comrades joined them, taking seats at the table. Once all eight chairs were filled, Gwyn spoke.

"Everyone's here, Noll."

Oliver reached into the pocket of his robe, took out his mask, and put it on. He could feel his mood shift with the gesture. In that moment, he became lord of the insurrection running rampant in the labyrinth.

"With the new year, our preparedness improves. It's time we act again," Gwyn said. "Let us hear it directly from you, Noll. What are we to do?" he asked as his younger brother's vassal.

This was no discussion; what Oliver decreed was law. Mindful of that, he gave voice to the decision he'd reached.

"Before the year is through, we take out Enrico Forghieri."

Oliver's brief statement echoed heavily through the hearts of everyone present. After several long seconds, Gwyn nodded gravely.

"Acknowledged. Our second target is the mad old man, then."

"…M-may I ask the reason, my lord?" a sixth-year male inquired. His voice was halting despite the advantage of age. "N-not arguing, of course. J-just…of the remaining six, he's…incredibly dangerous. I don't think we can win without losses—which isn't a p-problem, but…I don't want to leave the *why* unsaid. I—I want to do this *convinced*, i-if that makes sense."

A direct request from a man whose life was in his lord's hands. Oliver was not one to take that lightly.

"First, a simple process of elimination. At present, who do we stand a chance against? Based on our current combat readiness, the strengths derived from our specialties—we're a good match for a builder like Enrico Forghieri. We all know that without me providing specifics."

Their silence signaled agreement. The vassals here were key members and well aware of what magic their comrades had mastered. It was clear those skills could be combined into an anti-Enrico hit squad.

“Next, his position within Kimberly. Esmeralda may be at the top, but the ‘box’ of the school itself belongs to Enrico Forghieri. No teachers know the labyrinth or school building better than that mad old man,” Oliver went on. “Which also means that with his loss, we can expect significant oversights in the management of the campus itself. It will be easier for us to move through the shadows.”

There was a long road before this revenge was complete, and any directive had to consider the effect upon the future. That had influenced Oliver’s decision.

“So we wanna take him out early on. That much, I get,” said a seventh-year girl across the table. “But if we’re talking current odds, I dunno if he’s the easiest target. Honestly, I think we’ve got a way better chance against several others.”

She leaned forward, looking him right in the eye.

“Your Majesty, do you get what it means to fight him inside Kimberly? Really?”

Oliver didn’t even flinch.

“I appreciate your concerns. You want to be sure I am correctly assessing our opponent’s threat level. But the best way to alleviate those concerns is concrete strategy,” Oliver replied. “How do we fight the mad old man, you ask? How can we take him down? …Allow me to explain.”

From that point out, it was all business: a method to pry away each obstacle and slay the warlock named Enrico Forghieri, and more importantly, Oliver’s own role in that struggle.

Oliver was not alone. Advancing a year placed all students a big step closer to the madness of the spell.

“…Urgh…”

“Yes, yes, that’s it.”

Katie was gingerly moving her hands, the Snake-Eyed Witch behind her, giving instructions.

On the worktable before them was the corpse of a kobold. Miligan had brought it in for them to dissect. Katie had insisted they not use one brought in for labyrinth entertainment, but rather a kobold exterminated for causing harm in the outside world, with all the proper paperwork complete.

“…Sorry,” she whispered to the corpse.

Her athame sliced its ribs open, revealing the organs beneath, lungs and intestines alike. It felt like sin seeping its way into her through her fingertips. But her hands did not stop. No one was forcing her to do this; she’d made the decision for herself.

“You’re still a tad stiff but getting used to it. With this many under your belt, are you starting to get a sense of how magical fauna are built?”

“…I think so. There’s still a lot that shocks me, though…”

Katie wiped the sweat from her brow with a sleeve. She'd cut open far more than a handful of creatures by this point. Miligan had had her start with ball mice and work her way through a variety of species. And building on that experience, today she was attempting her first demi-human dissection.

"Everyone's like that at first. Organs and nerves are often located where no ordinary animal would have them. You could also say that unnatural construction is the hallmark of magical fauna. There is always a specific logic to it—it's never *just* crazy."

"…Right…"

"Wherever your path takes you, if you wish to study magifauna, you'll have to dissect them. Reading about them in books and doing it yourself are worlds apart. For now, you need quantity. Especially if you intend to be a magifauna vet."

Katie nodded several times. She'd known this lay ahead since she enrolled—Miligan had simply helped her get here faster.

Ordinary folk thought mages could heal illness or grievous injury with a wave of the wand. They weren't completely wrong, but—not quite right, either. Healing magic itself was a vast field with a dizzying range of disciplines.

And given their sheer differences in physiology, healing a human was very different from healing other creatures. Even among humans, treating a mage and an ordinary might require completely separate treatments. Katie had learned only the most basic level of human healing; that is, only the fundamentals taught in spellology class. If her troll, Marco, were ever seriously hurt—there was little she could do about it.

"But you certainly are picking the thorny path for yourself. You don't need veterinary skills to campaign for civil rights, you know. The anti-dissection crowd will have it in for you. Not that you should *care*, mind."

"…I know that."

Katie scowled but kept cutting. She reached for the tray next to her, and the familiar on it—Milihand—handed her the forceps. If Miligan was the brains here, this was *literally* her right (well, left) hand.

Once the skin and muscles were held open, Katie spoke again.

"Regardless…beast or demi, I want to do everything I can for them. And treating injury or illness is the best thing I can do."

At Kimberly, nobody listened if you spoke of ideals. She'd had that point driven home her first year. That's why she was doing her best to acquire practical skills. And a comprehensive knowledge of healing magic for magifauna and demi-species was one of the most critical therein.

Learning that required real understanding of the physical construction of the patient. Reading documents and papers would never be enough. What it really took was seeing and touching the creatures herself, observing them, and learning. As she was doing now.

“I agree, but a healthy share of the movement would consider that cultural invasion. The demis have their own standards of living and should perish when their time comes—they argue we shouldn’t interfere with that process lightly. And there are parts of that worth listening to. If kobold survival rates increased, they’d be a blight upon the lives of ordinaries. What’s your take on that?”

“I’ve been thinking about that since my trip to Galatea… If our habitats are overlapping this much, then I don’t think the arguments for maintaining ancient demi lifestyles hold much water. Regardless of how we got to this point, now we’ve got to find ways to survive together.”

“Once again, I agree. I was trying to teach trolls to speak because I was sure that would be the first step toward interspecies communication.”

“…And whatever my gripes about your methods, I get that part. I often wonder what it would be like if I could just talk to them.”

She looked down at the lifeless eyes of the kobold. Even within the activist community, there was a clear line drawn between demis you could or could not converse with. It was much easier to justify protecting a species that was capable of communicating with humans, especially if they had actual language skills. Which meant any demi-humans that didn’t meet those standards were looked down upon and treated that much worse. Like these kobolds.

Naturally, Katie took issue with that. She didn’t believe being able to speak to humans was the sole factor in determining a living thing’s intelligence. But in a purely human-centric society, her voice didn’t carry far.

“There’s no easy right answer. I’ve gotta feel my way between a rock and a hard place… That’s why I’ll do these dissections. I just won’t ever enjoy it.”

Silently, but with purpose, Katie kept working—until Miligan’s arms wrapped around her shoulders from behind.

“Honestly, you are *so* cute.”

“……Um, you can’t even see my face, though.”

“The top of your head is plenty. Pay me no mind.”

Katie thought this was ridiculous, but her pace didn’t slow at all.

Even if she wound up under the knife someday, she’d have only herself to blame.

“Once you’re done with that one, let’s take a quick break and then check out the labyrinth. That’s a lot for one day, but if we don’t push ourselves that hard, you’ll never be satisfied. Right?”

“Of course not,” Katie snapped.

Focus and energy seemed to well up as fast as she could use them.

“…Hahh, hahh……”

“Almost there. Don’t falter now, Guy!”

The bustling forest—the labyrinth’s second layer. This was where Oliver, Nanao, and Chela had their first perilous fight with a chimera on their way

to rescue Pete. Two students were scrambling up a bunch of the layer's landmark irminsul.

"…Hahh…hahh…"

"Well done! Catch your breath here."

Their long climb reached the end—of this stage, at least—and the expedition leader, year seven's very own Survivor, Kevin Walker, finally gave Guy permission to keel over.

"…They climbed this thing while fending off chimeras, then kept fighting on the other side? Are those three even human…?"

"It's certainly not something your average underclassman can do. Here, rations."

Walker tossed him some fruit. Guy caught it and peeled the rind with his athame, tearing into the scarlet flesh beneath. Faintly sweet but with the rich umami of fat—the nourishment his tired body craved.

"Mm, tastes good… Thanks for helping me like this."

"Hmm? I'm merely training a new club member," Walker replied, biting into his own rations. "Not many as gung ho as you, so I'm happy to pass on what I can."

Grateful for these words, Guy stared down at his hands.

"It really helps," he muttered. "I'm *done* being left behind."

An oath that made Walker fold his arms.

"Not to brag or anything, but you've come to the right place. Here at Kimberly, the vast majority of problems arise within this labyrinth. Only way to deal with them is to plunge its depths. Which means…"

"The more I know about the place, the more options I'll have, right?"

"Exactly! And there's no better person to teach that than me. There are plenty of better fighters here, but I feel confident in my claim to being the best at *staying alive*. I didn't repeat a year for nothing."

His grin was indomitable. The kind of grin that made you feel safe, like if you stuck by his side, you were guaranteed to come back in one piece. Guy had come to the Survivor for help because he wanted to smile like that himself.

"And—though risks abound—that's what makes the labyrinth so fascinating. Especially from a gourmet perspective." Walker caught his eye, then continued, "So don't take this *too* seriously. Joining me down here means you get good grub. And before you know it, you'll be owning the place. I guarantee it!"

"…Right on! Can't wait."

Guy finished off his fruit and scrambled to his feet. Walker nodded, then —a flicker of sadness crossed his face. He looked away, out across the bustling forest.

"Wish I could've convinced her, too," he said. "This place isn't all dark and hostile."

But the girl he spoke of was no more. And these regrets, this grief, would remain with him the rest of his life.

“Oh, there’s Guy! And he’s with Walker!”

“Unh. Guy, good?”

Katie was peering up at the irminsul through a telescope—riding on Marco’s shoulder. She and Miligan had brought the talking troll with them on their walk through the second layer.

“Firsthand instruction from the Survivor?” Miligan said, sounding impressed. “He’s no slouch, huh? Every bit as proactive as you.”

“You bet! We’ve made up our minds that the next time something happens, we’re not gonna let Oliver leave us behind.”

Feeling thirsty, Katie took a swig from her canteen.

“You’re such a tight-knit group,” the Snake-Eyed Witch said, smiling. “Which brings me to an important question.”

“?”

“Who you gonna bang first?”

Katie coughed so hard she almost fell off Marco’s shoulder.

“*Cough, cough…!* Wh-wh-where’d *that* come from?!”

“What’s there to be so flustered about? You’ll be a third-year soon enough, and everyone here knows this is when you get your first time over with. Most go for someone close to them. Pete’s trait means some delicacy would be required, so that makes Oliver and Guy your leading candidates.”

Miligan was clearly just speaking the truth as she knew it.

“O-Oliver and Chela told us not to rush into things!” Katie stammered. She was bright red and couldn’t meet the older girl’s eye. “They said don’t let the mood sweep us along and be sure it’s really someone who matters!”

“…Are they your parents?”

“They care about their friends! A-and we’re done talking about this!”

The girl had Marco push on through the trees. Miligan followed, repeating what she’d just heard like it was an entirely new concept.

“Be sure it’s someone who really matters, huh…? There was no one to tell me that when it was my time.”

Miligan shrugged, a strained smile on her face.

“My, my…I’m envious,” she said. This girl had friends who genuinely cared about her.

Ten AM on a sunny day. Second-year students were nervously gathered in a first-floor room, waiting for magical engineering class to begin.

“…This class alone I’ll *never* get used to,” Guy grumbled.

“Quite a few students have stopped coming,” Chela said, glancing around. “At least a ten percent drop since our first class.”

Standing one row ahead of her, Oliver didn’t blame them. The magical trap disassembly had only been the beginning; in this class, failing to complete an assignment *always* resulted in injury. Withdrawing was one way to protect yourself.

“……”

“…You okay there, Pete?”

Next to him, the bespectacled boy had a tight grip on the fabric of his pants. It was clear he was fighting his own fear. He'd been like this every time—but had never once missed a class.

"I'm fine," Pete insisted, steeling his nerves. "No matter what he throws at us, we just do the best we can."

Oliver nodded—and as he did, the floor beneath their feet disappeared.

"Wha—?"

"Augh!"

"Whoaaa?!"

Forty-plus students went plunging into darkness—but soon hit a sloped surface, which they slid down. A few flailed around in search of clues or tried stabbing the slope with their athame to stop their descent, but to no avail. It was like the whole slope was made of hardened gel.

Their descent did not last long. In less than a minute, they were flung into a wide-open space. Oliver caught himself and rolled to his feet, athame at the ready, assessing the situation. A rectangular room, at least ten times the size of any classroom. Three *things* spaced out on the floor, and at the center of this triangle—an old man with one lollipop in his left hand and two in the other.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Welcome to today's arena, children!"

His loud laugh proved more than capable of filling this space, and the students shuddered—he seemed exceptionally sinister this morning, and all of them knew what *that* meant. There was a clear indicator of how dangerous today's magical engineering assignment would be: the number of lollipops. Only one: comparatively doable. Two: caution required. Three or more—

"Our usual classroom was a *tad* cramped for today's undertaking! So I wasted no time dragging you into the labyrinth. As you've no doubt noticed, today's class is a joint one, involving all second-years enrolled in magical engineering!"

There were three holes in the walls of the room, and students from two other similar-sized classes were tumbling in. Clearly, everyone had met the same fate and were looking just as confused and alarmed.

"You're going to be dismantling and observing three golems. Naturally, they'll be live. Everybody sees them, right?"

Enrico glanced at the three objects around him. Each of them was maybe five yards wide and rather different looking—if equally intimidating. One was a white sphere; another, a rhombus with six insect-like legs; and the last, a mass of pitch-black gel with ripples cascading across the surface. Pete looked at each and gulped.

"They're…"

"Go on! Approach! Prod away! Magical engineering has given rise to countless successes, but golems stand above the crowd! Each of these three is a work of art, constructed by yours truly! Worth a look for any mage."

Learning what these things were did not really reassure anyone. Oblivious to their concerns, the mad instructor prattled on.

"Nonmagical people often confuse them with familiars or with marionettes and automatons. Certainly, they employ similar techniques, but this impression comes from a failure to discern the true essence of a golem. Why do you think that is, Ms. Cornwallis?"

Enrico suddenly spun around, pointing at a girl—Chela's half sister, Stacy Cornwallis.

"…The core concepts are distinct," she answered, her voice trembling. "Golems are constructs born of magical architecture, a specialty field of magical engineering. Their nature is closer to moving buildings than familiars or dolls."

"Most impressive! A hundred-point answer! Have a small lolly!"

The old man waved his wand and a piece of candy flew out of his pocket toward Stacy. She caught it without smiling, and Enrico spun around to face a new section of the room.

"Yes, golems are *buildings*, not pets or toys. Thus, they aren't necessarily humanoid and come in all shapes and sizes. There are constructs so big you might well mistake them for castles! Doesn't that very idea make you positively giddy?"

He took a big slurp of his lolly, then threw his arms out wide.

"These three golems are much more sensibly sized, but you'll find they are stuffed to the gills with functionality. Use everything you've learned to date to observe and dismantle them, learning every inch of what makes them tick. That is today's lesson."

That sounded entirely too normal. Nothing was ever normal in *this* class. The students braced themselves for the inevitable…and Enrico held his white wand high.

"Let us begin! **Satus sursum!**"

The moment his incantation ended, the golems shuddered to life. A single thought crossed every student's mind: *I knew it*.

"The toll upon your bodies will be greater than usual, but never fear! They've been ordered not to crush your skulls or hearts. Come! You've gone up a year! Let me see how much you've all grown!"

His expectant cry echoed through the room, and the ground shook with the multi-legged golem's footsteps.

"Y-yikes…"

"Back off before it steps on you!"

Students nearby scurried away. The rhombus golem's legs might be bug-like, but they were articulated, allowing for smooth movements akin to some sort of mollusk. They supported the entire construct's weight, and mechanical tentacles mercilessly pounded anything nearby. The pointed tips easily cracked the stone flooring.

But even as the students braced themselves to handle this threat, their ears caught an altogether different sound—the noise of something hard scraping the stone floors. The sphere golem, bearing down on a group of students—by rolling at them, much as its shape implied.

“I-it’s rolling this way!”

“Move! Now!”

Fearful of getting run over, the student body parted in both directions. The sphere golem rolled through the gap, slowed as it neared the wall, and turned—rolling in a new direction. Several students were casting, but their spells were just bouncing off its surface. They weren’t even slowing it down.

“Scatter, everyone! Crowding together will only make you a prime target!” Chela cried, already running.

People instinctively moved together when fighting large enemies, but this gave them no room to maneuver and could leave the whole group downed at once. Chela’s friends followed her, moving away from their class and spreading out—but staying within earshot. Others were doing the same, following the instructions of experienced students.

“Single incantations ain’t doing shit… These things are hard as hell!” Guy yelled.

The two golems were each drawing concentrated fire but not even wavering. Clearly a worrying level of resilience. They’d have to find the right element and focus their attacks or locate a weak point to target—but as Oliver scrambled for a viable approach, Katie suddenly yelled, “L-look out!”

She’d seen the sphere golem curve its course, rapidly closing in on a group of students fleeing in that direction. Katie broke into a run, but a moment later, several students were caught under the golem, unable to get away in time. The sight of them twitching, their lower bodies crushed, made her stop in her tracks.

“Augh…! This is awful…!” She impulsively took a step toward the injured.

“Don’t, Katie! If we run in without a plan, that’ll happen to us!” Oliver yelled.

It might seem cruel, but this was no time to be worrying about the fallen. He looked up at the sphere—its white sides now stained with the blood of the crushed students—and was about to start barking orders, but a forceful voice interrupted.

“Quit screaming, nobodies.”

Light shot from multiple athames, hitting the ground beneath the sphere as it neared a wall and slowed to turn. The stacked barrier spells raised the floor levels, trapping the golem between the walls.

“Ball golems aren’t a threat if they aren’t up to speed. Hit ’em by the walls or when they slow down to turn. Barriers and obstacles will get ’em stuck easy.”

The large boy leading this defense was using an amplification spell to project his voice—Joseph Albright, already barking further orders. Oliver blinked once, then grinned. This was exactly the approach he'd been about to suggest.

And a different voice was calling out in the other direction—Tullio Rossi.

"You are surely not allowing these six legs to alarm you, no? You see how it must 'ave three on the ground at all times or it cannot maintain its balance. You need merely watch out for the uplifted leg nearest you."

Oliver turned to find the Ytallian boy dancing through the multi-legged golem's flurry, not one limb coming anywhere close to hitting him.

"""""Flamma!"""""

Multiple fire spells all hit the same leg, striking the joint closest to the body. Oliver glanced at the source and found a blond girl—Stacy Cornwallis. Like Albright, she was leading several others into battle.

"The joints are a clear weakness," she called. "From this distance, we can still hit the upper joints with their limited mobility. Keep the element at fire and focus your attacks."

"I admire your courage, but stay out from under it. No telling what'll fall on your head," the half-werewolf Fay Willock added.

While Rossi kept it engaged from up close, they continued the barrage on its weak points. Not long after, lids popped open on the main body's sides, and dozens of smaller golems came spilling out—shaped just like the host.

"Impetus!"

But all of them were swept up in a gust of wind. As the small golems hit the ground, off-balance and not braced for a landing, a long-haired student strode into the midst, blade raised high.

"Crush any that get near you!" Richard Andrews yelled. "We can't have these running around underfoot!"

His confidence got several students attacking the small golems.

Rossi pinned one to the ground and stabbed it with his athame, grinning.

"Ha-ha! What a lark. Well done, Signor Andrews!"

"Fay, finish them."

"Mm!"

Rossi and those in Stacy's group were making quick work of the smaller golems. New attack patterns were a constant threat but also proved their approach was effective. Oliver looked back to the sphere golem to find it had extended several drill bits and was trying to demolish the containing walls. Like the multi-legged golem, it had a second form.

"A futile effort. Match my lead, nobodies. **Lutuom limus!**"

Albright's spell hit the ground just before the wall the drills were gouging. The students around him followed suit, magically softening the floor around it. The sphere golem punched through the wall and rolled out but sank into the mud a few yards away. With the floor itself a quagmire, the creature was trapped again.

“You see how to handle it? Then take it from here.” Albright turned and stared across the room—and Oliver did the same.

“That one’s the real problem,” Oliver noted.

As they watched, the third golem began slithering across the floor. Its slimy black liquid body had a metallic luster—clearly a very different threat than the other two.

“ ▬ ! Katie, Guy, Pete, back away!” Chela called, figuring it out.

She, Oliver, and Nanao stepped forward. A dozen other skilled students joined them at the fore.

As they drew within twenty yards of the new threat, Oliver spoke its name.

“A liquid golem…!”

The third construct slid toward them. A part of its body extended, a gesture that reminded Oliver of an upswung arm—which spelled trouble.

“Jump!” he yelled.

Nanao, Chela, and several others all leaped into the air—and something passed rapidly underfoot. They landed a moment later—and eight students who’d failed to react in time hit the floor.

“Gah…!”

“M-my legs…my legggs!”

They had good reason to scream. Not one of them had anything left below the knee. Oliver gritted his teeth—that had been much faster than he’d expected. The attack that claimed their limbs had been a high-velocity liquid metal whip, enhanced by centrifugal force. If you failed to read the premotion, it was nigh impossible to dodge.

“Quit squealing and back off!” Albright yelled, stepping up next to Oliver. “Only room here for those who can read the attacks!”

Several front liners admitted they were outclassed and backed away, replaced by Stacy, Fay, Rossi, and Andrews. Rossi glanced down the ranks and grinned.

“Ha-ha-ha! We meet again, eh? All my favorite faces!”

“Skip the chatter, Mr. Rossi. This is hardly the time for a reunion.”

“First, we need info. Anyone here got facts about this thing? Fought one before?” Andrews asked.

Faced with this unknown threat, everyone was looking to one another.

“Afraid it’s a first for me,” Albright said. “All I got is that there’ll be a single brain in the center controlling it. Any corrections or addendums, Mr. Horn?”

His voice was free of the scorn it once held. That alone was admirable progress. However—

“…I don’t know much more,” Oliver admitted. “But be careful about touching the liquid itself. I’ve heard there’s a lot of corrosive—”

“It’s black lidium!”

A voice came from behind. Though surprised, Oliver kept his eyes locked on the liquid golem. “Pete?” he called.

“There’s only three magic metals used in liquid golem creation,” the bespectacled boy said. “Silverized miarki, kaja dwerg alloy, and black lidium. And the last one’s the only one that’s this color. Melting point at one atmosphere is minus ninety, boiling point is three thousand two hundred and eighty-eight!”

“Minus ninety…? Then if we get close and use freezing spells, they’ll work. Hat’s off. Good intel, Pete Reston.”

Pete looked surprised, clearly not expecting a compliment from Albright.

Armed with this new info, Oliver quickly put a plan together.

“…Anyone capable of dodging its whip attack should move in and freeze the liquid parts. Then we’ve just got to dig through the frozen metal with our athames and reach the core to destroy it. We clear on that plan?”

Everyone nodded. They all knew one another’s skills, so no one argued. The sheer speed of this consensus made Oliver wonder if the canceled first-year battle royal had actually *not* been a total waste of time, after all.

“Go!”

All dashed forward. The liquid golem shifted shapes, once again thrashing with the whip. This blow came at waist height, but they’d all spotted that from the premotion and ducked under it. The golem transformed again, now swinging multiple whips both horizontally and vertically.

“Gets worse as we get close! But so far—”

“Hahh!”

Chela’s fancy footwork got her through, and Nanao knocked them away with her blade. Everyone was fending off the attacks their way. Five yards out, they stopped, going back and forth until Rossi spied an opening and soft-stepped up to the golem’s side. Fully expecting a counterstrike, he was about to chant a freezing spell—

“Augh?!”

But before he got a word out, the golem’s body shot a spike right at him. His natural instincts were all that allowed him to dodge, but it still scraped his side. He hastily backed away.

“Hup…! W-wait, this thing—it ’as no eyes?! Is it not detecting us with sound?”

“ ⎯ ?!”

Oliver had seen the whole thing and was just as shocked. That golem’s counter was bizarre. Rossi had approached it undetected, so if it had been sound reliant, its strike wouldn’t have been that accurate. Sound was far less accurate than vision to begin with. Since it had been sticking to wide-range slashes, he’d assumed that was compensating.

But the golem upturned his theory again. Chela, Stacy, and Albright each found thrusts aimed at them. These were much narrower than the whip attacks but came straight out with no warning, and it was hard to react in time.

Stacy barely dodged hers, yelling, “Hey, why did it change things up? What’s with this thing?!”

“Stace, it’s too dangerous! Stay behind me!”

“A second phase? Damn…we were so close!” Albright swore.

Like the other two golems, the liquid golem had shifted attack patterns to fend off their advance.

“……Hmm?” Nanao said. She leaped sideways as if she was testing something. The golem thrust right at her, and she deflected it with her blade. “It’s anticipating our movements. Like fighting a human.”

“A *human*?”

That word caught at the edge of his mind, and Oliver dug in after it. These reactions were less like a golem than a living creature—and more like a human than an animal. If it could predict their movements, then the golem had experience in combat. The mad old instructor was famous for a reason, but could he make a golem that did *that*?

“ ▁ !”

Dodging another whip, Oliver racked his brain. It *might* be possible. But it didn’t quite make sense to him. For example—the attack he’d *just* dodged. Like Nanao, he was stuck at the five-yard range, so why was the golem using the whip? Why didn’t it come at him with the pinpoint thrust? Why was it able to attack the others but not him?

That thought was enough to reach a hypothesis. His position was the key. They didn’t know what the golem’s eyes were, but he might be standing somewhere that prevented it from accurately locating him. So where might that be? What could be making him invisible to the golem?

Suppose the enemy’s eyes were literally light-detecting organs. In that case, the most obvious reason why he’d be out of sight was because there was something between them. And the primary candidate for that obstacle was the golem’s own bulk. So the eyes must be on the other side of it, which meant…

“Katie, Guy, Pete! Cover the instructor’s eyes!”

That was the logical solution. The flow of battle had led him to be on the far side of the golem from his friends. They heard him cry out from behind it and looked at one another.

“H-his eyes?”

“…Come on!”

“Mm!”

None of them knew what this meant. But they turned around despite that, ignoring any trepidation. All three ran right for the source of this horror show—Enrico Forghieri.

“Oh? What is it, children?” he said, all smiles. “Question about the assignment?”

Guy and Pete drew up close, looking uncertain of their next step. You couldn’t just point an athame at a teacher, and even if you tried, you wouldn’t be able to actually manage anything.

“…What do we do?”

“……”

Katie knew why they were hesitating. But they didn’t have time to *think*. The curly-haired girl sheathed her blade and stomped right up to Enrico.

“Pardon me!”

“Ohhh?!”

She put her hand over his eyes. Shaking his head, Pete did the same, and Guy loomed behind them, using his tall frame to further obscure Enrico’s view. And the moment they were in place—the liquid golem’s attacks lost all accuracy. A horizontal slash passed harmlessly to one side, and Oliver took this as proof his theory was correct.

“…The pattern’s reverted! It *was* being remote controlled!”

There *had* been hints. The old man himself had pointed out that technology was shared between marionettes, automatons, and golems. And that meant golems were not guaranteed to be self-directed. It was entirely possible someone else was issuing directives. That had been the trick here; when it shifted to its second phase, the golem had been acting based on Enrico’s visual data.

Liquid metal spikes were still shooting out of the golem’s surface, a harrowing threat if aimed right—but now that the trick was uncovered, it was nothing this group couldn’t handle. All eight of them could leap back to evade the thrust, then lunge in close as the spike retracted.

“Take it down! **Frigus!**”

“”””””””Frigus!”””””””

Each jabbed an athame into the liquid golem and began freezing it from point-blank range. The golem tried to fight back, but the frozen sections couldn’t shape-shift. A half-formed whip lost shape, and the golem stopped moving.

“Don’t relax yet!” Chela turned to the room behind her. “Anyone nearby, step in and lend a hand. If we don’t keep this thing frozen, it’ll be up and active again in no time!”

Students in earshot came running in, adding their blades to the pile and pouring in more cold. The sheer volume was too much for the golem to withstand. Certain the chill had stabilized, Oliver removed his own blade.

“Keep that cooling going!” he said. “Nanao, let’s dig in!”

“With pleasure!”

Nanao freed her katana, and the two of them began excavating in tandem. The frozen metal was as hard as steel, but to a mana-charged athame, that was no worse than hardened soil. The hole in the golem’s side grew quickly in size. At this point, Oliver paused.

“Okay, we’re almost at the center! Careful, there might be—”

Before he could finish that thought, there was a cry from the sphere golem team.

“A—a magic trap! There’s a magic trap in the golem!”

Oliver turned to look, and a third voice went up from the other direction.

“Same here! Shit, one false move and it’ll trigger…!” yelled a student digging into the top of the now-legless golem.

Chela glanced at both, then spun back to their own golem. “…Oliver!”

He nodded, took a deep breath, and dug in once more. Less than two minutes later, they had their answer—right next to the golem’s control core was a box laden with sinister mana. It was nice enough to include a countdown timer.

“…This one, too,” he growled, gritting his teeth.

Across the room, Enrico got his face free, laughing maniacally.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! All three golems are defeated! Well done. Excellent work! But the assignment isn’t over yet! We’re in the exciting bonus round, now! Golems are fundamentally architectural constructs. We discussed this earlier, remember? Homes, warehouses, or castles—all of them are built to contain the people or things within. That goes for golems, too! They frequently have a space at the heart, in which something is kept safe!”

As the old man motormouthed his way through this exposition, Oliver fumed—precisely because it *did* make sense. Despite the ludicrous threat levels of his assignments, Enrico Forghieri’s classes *always* emphasized understanding the fundamental nature of the topic at hand. And experience with this principle was enough that he knew *this* was the final trial of the day.

“And what do we have inside today? Your favorite! Magic traps! Safe, stable, timed, spring-loaded ones! If you take too long or get the disarming sequence wrong, they’ll go off! Everyone within ten yards will meet a horrible fate. Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! A crisis, indeed!”

Enrico slurped away at his lollipop, making no effort to hide how thoroughly he was enjoying the spectacle. Meanwhile, Albright withdrew his athame and turned around.

“…Can’t leave these to nobodies,” he muttered. “I’ll take the ball golem.”

“We’ll head to the multi-legged golem, then,” said Stacy. “Take care of things here, Chela.” She and Fay ran off. Andrews joined Albright at the sphere golem.

Rossi shrugged. “Disarming ’as never been my forte. Maintaining this icy chill will be my sole contribution.”

“Shamed as I am to admit it, I, too, am ill-suited to gadgetry.”

Nanao bowed out as well, which left Oliver and Chela eyeing each other.

“…Guess it’s down to us, Chela.”

“I’m afraid that’s our only option.”

But before they could tackle the trap, a voice called out from behind.

“—Wait!”

They looked back and saw the bespectacled boy running toward them.

“…Let me in on the dismantle. I *know* I’ve worked harder than anyone in this class. Let me prove it.”

“Pete?! But—,” Oliver began, then swallowed his protest. He remembered something Pete had said before. *“Quit acting like you’re our guardian. We’re not here to get in your way.”*

The boy in front of him was no longer the frightened first-year who didn’t know his right from his left. He was a full-fledged mage, survivor of a year in the Kimberly hellscape. It was high time Oliver adjusted his own perception accordingly.

“…Okay,” he said with a nod. “Help us out.”

“Mm!” Pete instantly slipped in between them, and together, they started taking the trap apart. All students in range watched closely, a cold sweat on their brows.

This stage of the assignment was as grimly quiet as the combat had been raucous. A mistake would mean disaster, not only for the people working but everyone keeping the golem itself pinned. And if that wasn’t stress enough, the clock was ticking—

“Disarmed!”

“Ours is done, too! And just in the nick of time…”

Cheers went up from two directions. Albright’s and Stacy’s teams had successfully disarmed their golems’ traps. But the jubilation soon died down—all eyes turning to the last location.

“…Two minutes left. Hate to say it, but we’re out of time to analyze,” Oliver muttered, lowering his wand.

They had the trap interior almost fully exposed. Chela and Pete looked up at him.

“No time to debate the right approach, either,” he added. “We’ve gotta pick someone and leave it to them.”

“You cannot be serious!” Rossi wailed, taking another turn on freeze duty. But the trap’s clock just kept ticking.

After a few more long seconds, Oliver said, “I nominate…Pete.”

“…Huh?”

The bespectacled boy looked genuinely surprised, so Oliver hastily added a rationale.

“From the work we’ve done so far, Pete’s been the sharpest mind, always one step ahead on picking apart how it works. He’s really thrown himself into magical engineering, and it’s apparent his knowledge already trumps our own. I think that’s grounds enough to put the final choice in his hands.”

He made it clear this wasn’t preferential treatment but an objective determination based on the disarming procedure so far. Chela nodded.

“…True enough. It pains me to admit it, but I’m in agreement.”

“ ⎯ !”

When they both looked to him, Pete swallowed hard, not moving.

Oliver gave him a nod. “We’ve made our choice. One minute left. If you’re willing, take it away.” He shot the timer a meaningful look, well aware the bespectacled boy’s shoulders were shaking.

Pete knew this was no time for nerves—and so, white wand in hand, he stepped up to the trap without steeling said nerves in the slightest.

“…Hah…hah…”

He knew what to do. The steps to disarm this trap were already clear in his mind. But he couldn’t bring himself to actually take them. His arms and lips were petrified, his breath and heartbeat throbbing in his ears.

“…Hahh…hahh…hahh…!”

Pete knew further worrying was a waste of time, but his mind wouldn’t stop spinning. If his approach was wrong—he wasn’t the only one in harm’s way. Everyone around him would go down, too. Oliver and Chela were right next to him and would bear the brunt of it. But they’d put their faith in him.

And that was what really scared him. That was far more terrifying than getting hurt himself.

“…Can…”

“?”

“…Can you hold me, Oliver…? Doesn’t matter how…”

Feeling a desperate need for reassurance, the words left Pete’s mouth before he knew it. Oliver let a single beat pass, then stepped up and put his arms around his friend from behind. Like spreading his warmth through the boy’s frozen body.

“…I’ve been watching you. I’ve seen how much you’ve improved,” Oliver said softly.

“……”

“So trust me. You’ve got this, Pete. Do what you think is best.”

He put his all in that brief phrase. Coupled with the embrace, it felt like the sun beating down on Pete’s back. And the bespectacled boy’s arm finally budged. The golem’s shell was peeled off, exposing the trap’s inner workings. With his right hand, he slipped several toolplant seeds in, each the size of a poppy seed, and then shook a small bottle of nutrients over them. He held up his wand…

“ ____ Brogoroccio.”

A growth-enhancing spell. The seeds sprouted, sending spindly roots through the circuits. These sucked up the elementals flowing through the device, and the magical connection binding the components was lost.

There was a click, and the timer’s needle stopped. Two seconds left. No one cheered yet. The silence was palpable.

It was broken by a soft clap.

“All traps disarmed and the assignment cleared. Congratulations, children.”

His maniacal laugh gone, Enrico Forghieri was now dishing out compliments. As he did, he waved his wand around, sending candy from his pocket—five pieces, for five students.

“Mr. Albright, Mr. Rossi, Ms. Cornwallis, Mr. Willock, and Mr. Andrews—a treat for each of you. Not only did you disarm the traps, you

immediately identified the golem functions and took action against them. Well done. Far fewer people injured this time!”

Here he turned toward the liquid golem. Again his wand swayed, sending lollipops their way.

“And treats for Mr. Horn, Ms. Hibiya, and Ms. McFarlane. Bravely charging into battle against the liquid golem, leading directly to its defeat. Mr. Horn’s unraveling of the remote function is especially impressive. The fruits of your bountiful combat experience, I gather?”

A gleam of curiosity appeared behind those glasses, and Oliver had to fight to keep himself from looking perturbed. At length, the old man’s eyes turned to the boy in Oliver’s arms. He waved his wand once more, and over a dozen lollies flew into the air, a ribbon tying them together. The sugary mass swooped toward Pete.

“But above all, Mr. Reston—your efforts deserve an entire bouquet of goodies.”

“…Oh…”

The bespectacled boy caught the candy bundle, clearly stunned.

“First, you knew the types of magical metals that could be used in a liquid golem and could distinguish between them,” Enrico said, moving closer. “That was genuinely astonishing! That isn’t knowledge you can obtain without systematically reading your way through tomes upon tomes of treatises. Goodness knows how much time you’ve spent in the library the past year.

“On top of that, you had both the observational and analytical skills to determine the magic trap’s construction. The trap within the liquid golem was far more difficult than the others. The fact that you were able to disarm it at all is proof of your diligence.”

By this point, Enrico was right in front of him. Oliver’s arms tightened, clearly worried, but the old man never even looked at him. He leaned in close to Pete, their glasses almost touching, the mad old man’s eyes gleaming.

“Excellent work. You have *potential*.”

“ ⎯ !”

A shudder ran down Pete’s spine—but mingled with it was a rush of joy. This horrifying warlock was praising *him*. He’d said he had potential—Pete, whose nonmagical background had left him dismissed by all and sundry.

“Tell me—would you be interested in visiting my laboratory?”

Propelled by forces he could not resist, Pete nodded. Oliver knew he had no right to stop him, but his grip about the bespectacled boy’s slender frame tightened. Feeling a wave of panic, Oliver had a thought…

I’ve gotta take this madman down. As soon as I can, before he destroys my friend.

“…All three of them have improved tremendously,” Chela said, teacup in one hand. She, Oliver, and Nanao were in the dining hall for lunch, having

just finished one of their greatest classroom trials yet. Katie, Guy, and Pete were all elsewhere, studying or training. As they often were, lately.

"…Yes," Oliver said. "They always had the appetite, but lately they've learned to act despite the dangers present. I find that hard to applaud without reservation, but…let's just say, they're gaining the mental fortitude of a mage."

He took a bite of his meat pie.

"A year at Kimberly makes all the difference," Chela agreed, nodding. "Compare anyone from our year with the new students and you can tell at once. See those kids over there? That's us, a year ago."

She pointed, and Oliver looked. Through the crowded lunchroom, he saw several faces he recognized, walking nervously together. One girl towered over the others—Rita Appleton.

"Teresa!" she yelled. "Teresa, where'd you go?"

"Aw, forget her! She doesn't know the meaning of the word *coordinate*."

"B-but she actually ate with us for once! That's progress, right?"

Dean and Peter were behind her. The name they were calling was all Oliver needed to figure things out. He'd told her to eat lunch with other students, but perhaps he should've insisted she not vanish instantly when they were done. Suppressing a sigh, he voiced what Chela was thinking.

"Yep… They look like newborn deer."

Trying not to laugh, Chela looked across the table to the Azian girl. "But in your case, Nanao…it's your surroundings that are changing."

"Hmm?"

Nanao glanced up from her drumstick. Her appetite suggested there was no cause for concern, but Chela elected to ask anyway.

"You have your first senior league match tomorrow. You'll be sharing the skies with veteran fliers. Feeling prepared?"

"I am at the ready, my heart soaring with anticipation."

Not a trace of stress or trepidation. Clearly just looking forward to it.

But then she put the chicken down, straightening herself up, and turned to face Oliver.

"That said, I imagine—nay, I am certain—the battle will be far fiercer than any before. Falls will be truly spectacular. Oliver, do you have me covered?"

Oliver put his fork down and turned to face her in kind.

"…Of course I do. I'm your catcher," he replied. "Just…don't forget the dangers that flight poses. Winning a match is nowhere near as important as coming back safe and sound. Promise me you'll see to that."

He'd said this to her time and again. Nanao nodded solemnly, and Chela grinned at the two of them.

"A rider goes nowhere without a skilled catcher," she said. "I'm looking forward to seeing both of you in action."

And the big day arrived. By ten AM, the stands were filled to the brim, the skies teeming with masterful broomriders. The student doing commentary was already yelling.

"It's the moment you've aaaaall been waiting foooor! The day of reckoning! The sixteenth match of the senior league, the Wild Geese versus the Blue Swallows! And the senior league debut of Nanao Hibiya, the shining new star who's rocketed to the top with lightning speed!"

The crowd was already roaring. Clearly, everyone here was certain this would be a match for the ages. Before it had even begun, their enthusiasm had already reached a fever pitch.

"And today's commentary is not just by yours truly! We've invited the broomriding instructor himself, Dustin Hedges! Instructor Hedges, what are we looking out for today?"

"Ms. Hibiya's flying and how the senior league welcomes her. It oughtta be a shock to the system."

"So it won't be as easy for her as the juniors?"

"Of course not! The Blue Swallows aren't gonna just let a rookie show up and have *fun*."

Hedges leaned back against his chair with a creak. His eyes were on one corner of the sky, where Nanao and the Wild Geese were having their final pre-match meeting.

"…They've got Instructor Hedges in?" muttered a male student—the Wild Geese team captain. "Now we *really* can't screw up."

Every player had their instructions, and they were waiting for the match to begin. There, Nanao raised a hand.

"Pardon the repeated confirmations, but…am I really just to fly like usual?"

"That's right," the captain answered, grinning. "Your first task is to fly how you want to and get a taste of the senior leagues. We can add in strategies afterward."

He glanced over at their opponents.

"Though they'll have something to say about *that*."

"Oh, they're putting the rookie in!"

"Well, Ashbury? How do we butter her up?"

The veteran players were clearly enjoying this. But the Blue Swallows' ace player—Diana Ashbury—kept her tone curt.

"You handle her in the opening act. Just don't drop her."

"Sure…and after that?"

Ashbury reached for the club on her hip, running her fingers down it.

"I'll put her in a tailspin. She's gonna crash so hard it'll be a month before she can look at a broom again."

Her teammates whistled.

As the crowd waited impatiently—a fanfare rang out.

"—And they're off!"

"Show 'em, Nanao!"

Katie, Guy, Pete, and Chela were all in the stands, cheering as loud as the other team's supporters.

In the sky above, three shadows were closing in on Nanao.

"Oof, already three players marking her! Rude!"

"…Not so much marking as…"

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Hibiya."

"Welcome to the senior leagues! It's an honor to have you here."

"We've even got a welcome gift for you. Hope you like it."

"—Hrm."

Three voices behind her. Already outnumbered, but Nanao was not one to let that bother her. She pulled on the broom's head, rapidly ascending—and kept going, tracing a circle that placed her behind her foes.

"Ooh, nice loop the loop."

"Glad you've got the guts to get behind us instead of running away."

"Well worth leaving space above you!"

All three Swallows were grinning. A second later, their broom pitch leaned back into a rapid ascent, gaining height but losing speed, then flitting through the air like feathers on the wind.

"—Mm?!"

Trying to follow would risk losing control, so she maintained speed, shooting underneath them, but—

They all used inertia to right themselves and were on her tail yet again. Once more, they jeered at her back.

"Surprised? That's called a feather fall."

"Speed alone won't help you survive up here. You've gotta learn to *stall*."

They'd intentionally used the stall of the up pitch to swap positions. She'd never seen a maneuver like that in the juniors and was genuinely impressed. Sacrificing the stability of speed midflight could easily leave you dangerously exposed. But these riders all had the raw skill to keep it under control.

And the pressure they were putting on her made her fly faster. They clearly had the upper hand when it came to jockeying for position, so before they took initiative, she was better off gaining distance and coming at them head-on. But of course—they knew what she was doing.

"Already pulling away? Decisive!"

"I can't keep up with that boost. That broom's famous for a reason."

"Still, that leaves her *just* fast."

They nodded at one another and banked left. Nanao had headed into a turn at the far end of the arena, and their tighter turn left them coming in right on her tail again.

"They caught her! Those three Blue Swallows won't let Hibiya shake 'em!"

"They anticipated her move. Hibiya's maneuvers are still a tad too obvious."

Hedges was watching the dogfight above. For all her talents, the first wall Nanao Hibiya was facing was exactly what he'd expected—and what every rookie struggled with.

"In the boundless open sky, she might win, but in this narrow field, you've always gotta turn. And other players can read the timing and trajectory of that. Experience will make her better at feints and tricks, but so far, she's outshone her competition so hard she never needed any of that. The downside to her talent."

"She was too good to ever need strategy…! What irony! Hibiya can't seem to shake the veterans' mark!"

There was sweat on the student commentator's hands.

"That's not a mark." Hedges snorted. "They're just saying hello. A nice way of telling the rookie exactly where she is now."

Meanwhile, Nanao's friends were watching, mouths parched. They'd never seen her pursued so doggedly, unable to turn the tables.

"Damn, she can't get away!" said Guy. "And she's so much faster!"

"They're more experienced. They know exactly what she's going to do," Chela explained.

"Three-on-one's too much! Why aren't her teammates helping?!" Katie asked, looking around for the other Wild Geese. But they clearly had no intention of stepping in.

"…They're riding her hard. You sure we shouldn't do anything, Captain?"

In fact, the same thought had crossed her teammates' minds. They weren't usually prone to letting their comrades suffer the squeeze. But this time alone the captain shook it off.

"It's what we expected. No need to help. Plus, I don't think she'll spend all day reeling from surprise."

He flashed a mischievous grin, then jerked his chin at the Azian flier.

"Don't worry… They'll soon learn just how dangerous their prey is."

Dogfights weren't only about the chase. Each time they drew close, three clubs swung at her, and Nanao was forced to fend them off no matter how awkward her position.

"Hard to avoid a hit from your blind spot, isn't it? Especially on your off hand!"

"Here's a tip: If you're right-handed, best to make your turns clockwise. That way, if you get cut off, they're on your dominant side."

The Blue Swallows were alternating attacks with advice. Which was, of course, partially manipulative. Yet, at the same time, they hadn't seen any results.

"…She really doesn't crumble, huh? No matter how many times we swing…"

"Her speed advantage makes it hard to land a finisher. I'm gonna take a run from the front."

"Oh, already going for it? You know if you drop her too easy, Ashbury's gonna lose her shit."

“I don’t give a damn what *she* thinks. Plus, if we keep three on the samurai all day, it’ll cost us the victory.”

One fed-up flier broke off pursuit, gaining distance. As Nanao exited her turn at the far side of the course, she was right in front of her.

“…Mm!”

“Sorry, rookie.”

“It’s been fun, but your lesson’s over.”

The two opponents on her tail were still jeering, making no bones about this being a pincer attack. They were winding up their rookie hazing with a takedown. The moment Nanao took the hit from ahead, with the loss of momentum or stall that caused, both Swallows would hit her from behind. A classic formation for polishing off an outnumbered foe. But…

“—Hmph.”

“…Huh?”

As their clubs clashed—it was the Swallow who lost her balance. Seeing their teammate reel and lose altitude, and their chance at a follow-up hit evaporate, the rear party looked surprised.

“Yo?!”

“Wh-what the heck are you doing?!”

“S-sorry…! …Huh? What…what *was* that?”

The Swallow was baffled though still flying—but until she recovered altitude and speed, her teammates were on their own. They looked at each other.

“I don’t like it. Match me on this turn and let’s make sure she goes down.”

“Two at once on a rookie? Even here, that’s—”

“Just do it! We let her get away, Ashbury really will kill us.”

Now *they* were the ones stressing this. The Azian girl might be talented, but she was a second-year, fresh out of the juniors—they *couldn’t* let her win.

Nanao hit the far end and went into her umpteenth turn. They’d both read her course and came at her from above and below. Even if she dodged one hit, the other would get her. A polished combo showing their years of training.

“—Down you go, rookie!”

He was sure he had her. The player above swung his club back, aiming for her head; the player below was going for the body blow. But just before they committed—Nanao’s broom jumped forward.

“Huh—?”

“Wha—?!”

The Azian girl’s unexpected acceleration threw off their timing. The player above failed to take a swing at all, and the one below clashed with her a moment earlier than he’d expected. First she was on him, then—

“Gah—!”

His adjustment came too late. Nanao's club hit him square in the chest, and he was off his broom, plummeting headfirst toward the ground.

"Ohhhhhhh! He's going doooown! Hibiya broke out of the three-man mark head-on!"

"They rushed to finish her and got the timing wrong," Hedges grumbled. "Come on! You should have known she wasn't at top speed yet. That's what you get for underestimating a rookie."

"Instructor Hedges, can you tell us what Hibiya just did?"

"You saw it yourself! She's better with a club than that downed idiot. That's all."

There was a small smile on his face. He might not realize it, but that look spoke volumes.

This was what a true star brought to the game.

"To think I'd be employing Hibiya-style mounted swordplay in the sky," Nanao muttered. She could feel that hit in both hands and knew it was true. She looked around for her next opponent—and at last, the Wild Geese captain let her teammates join her.

"Nice work, Nanao. You returned that greeting properly."

"Indeed!" Nanao replied, grinning happily. "The senior league does not disappoint. Not a warrior to be trifled with."

"I think you pulled the rug out from under them," her captain said with a chuckle. "Try to drop a rookie, get dropped instead."

He glanced toward the Blue Swallows, and their entire atmosphere had changed. Their formation was shifting, radiating caution. That one drop had completely changed their opinion of Nanao. Thoroughly pleased with this, the captain turned toward her.

"Keep it up," he said. "Take on anyone you like. But just know that they'll be taking you seriously now."

"I wouldn't want it any other way."

With a nod, Nanao took off like a shot. It was *her* turn to attack.

"Wow, wow, wowww!" Katie yelled. "Nanao's still in this! She took down a senior league player!"

Nanao's daring escape had left the curly-haired girl waving both arms wildly. Chela was just as elated but at least trying to maintain a semblance of cool.

"Swinging a weapon while riding something is not a technique so easily mastered. I assume she's applying skills learned on horseback—yet another product of her homeland. That experience gives her the edge with the club."

"And it works here in the senior league, too! Let's see how many others she takes out!"

Guy was feeling pretty optimistic, but Chela shook her head.

"It won't be that easy," she said. "She took advantage of her opponent's error—but now that they know her skills aren't rookie level, they'll come at her in kind. This is where her real battle begins."

Her eyes sought out the opponent's biggest threat: a witch so terrifying she'd downed three Geese while Nanao had managed only one Swallow.

"Remember—the Swallows have an ace of their own."

"…S-sorry, Ashbury," the male Swallow said, regrouping with his team. An apology was all he could offer. They'd gone after a rookie with three on their side, and they not only failed to drop her—they'd lost a teammate.

"Fall and you're dead. Start over from scratch. That's what I'd usually say, but…"

Ashbury never minced words, but for once, she was actually smiling. Her attention was clearly on something other than her teammates' failures.

"She's not bad at all. Hey, losers, focus on the match. I'm gonna go play with *her*."

With that, Ashbury shot off across the sky. Total grandstanding, ignoring all strategies—but no one complained. That's how the Blue Swallows' ace operated.

In seconds, she was at her target's side, flying neck and neck.

"How's your day going, Ms. Hibiya?"

"Milady Ashbury."

"Nice job waking up our dumb asses. Figured I should thank you in person."

She raised her club. She was on the right; Nanao, the left. Since both were right-handed, this formation gave Nanao the ostensible advantage in combat.

"I'll let you have the dominant side. And don't worry, my team won't interfere."

"A joust, then?" Nanao said, delighted. "I'll gladly take that offer!"

And their aerial clash began.

"Hibiya accepts the challenge! This is gonna be a doozy! The rookie hope versus the school's top player, one-on-one!"

"Not a shock, given their personalities. This is a team sport, people!" Hedges shook his head. Then he sighed, cutting off his amplification spell. "Shame, though. I'd have liked to see Ms. Hibiya fly a little longer."

Only the student commentator next to him heard. He quickly cut his own spell.

"Instructor, you mean—"

"Their talents might be even. But experience in the sport? And sheer… specialization?"

There was clearly no doubt in his mind. He'd been watching the Swallows' ace for years now. There was no disputing what was to come.

"Get her on a broom and she's faster and stronger than anyone. That's what Diana Ashbury was born to do, how this mage has lived her entire life…as Ms. Hibiya is about to learn."

"Hahhhhhh—!"

With a roar, Nanao put her back into a swing. They slammed together like their entire bodies were blades, knocking each other back, hearing their very bones scream.

"Very good!" Ashbury cried, exultant. "Never seen a swing like that! Don't hold back! Show me all you got!"

Not all her land-bound moves applied in the air, but Nanao's flurry was nonstop. And Ashbury was not only blocking, she was deflecting every strike—an astonishing feat all on its own. Since the first clash of clubs, she'd just been *letting* Nanao spar with her.

"Didn't think you'd be this good! It'd be a shame to drop you in a side fight."

Ashbury parried a blow and sped up, upping her pitch until she was rocketing skyward. Nanao followed, climbing higher and higher. The Blue Swallows' ace called over her shoulder.

"Follow me. Your efforts deserve a reward—I'm gonna show you the magic."

An invitation to still higher skies. A hundred yards, five hundred, a thousand, and still they climbed. Leaving the crowds and their teammates far behind. Ashbury didn't seem to care. They burst through the clouds, bound for what lay beyond.

"……Ngh……!"

As they crossed the four-thousand-yard mark, Nanao sensed something awry. Her broom was getting hard to control. The higher they went, the bumpier her flight, and the more mana it took to combat that and maintain speed.

With good reason—they higher they got, the less air there was, and the fewer magical particles in it. With the brooms drawing no power from the air, the demands on the rider's reserves grew that much steeper.

"…Huff…!"

A trail of white breath streamed from Nanao's lips. The temperature was long since below freezing, and they were at half the surface atmosphere. Even for a mage, this was a harsh environment. If she climbed any farther, her life would be in danger. Her instincts were warning her to turn back now.

But she wasn't stopping. As long as her opponent was still out ahead of her, Nanao wasn't about to turn back. This wasn't just stubbornness on her part—if she gave up and turned back, Ashbury would turn and strike, and a blow to the back while headed straight down was not good news.

But if they kept flying, it became a test of endurance. Her foe was struggling just as much with the altitude. Not even the most hardened broomrider could ascend forever; once she reached her peak, she'd *have* to turn. And Ashbury should, in theory, hit that a moment before Nanao.

This was her one shot at winning this. Read Ashbury's trajectory and cut her off, landing a blow from the side. Given how tiring this climb had been, odds were high a blow like that would connect.

“ ⎯ Huff ⎯ ”

But Ashbury *knew* that’s what Nanao had planned. And that’s why—she did something Nanao could never have predicted.

“Go on,” she said.

And her feet left the stirrups. They were over eight thousand yards in the air. A gulf opened between them and the earth below, at heights even birds dared not fly.

But Ashbury let go of her broom.

“ ⎯ ?!”

Her opponent above split in two. That made no sense, and Nanao boggled at it.

Flung free into the air, the inertia of Ashbury’s upward trajectory gave the witch a few seconds before she began to fall, and she used those to flip herself. She was now looking straight down at Nanao—and their eyes met.

Meanwhile, her broom was still rocketing higher. It took several seconds for it to burn through the last of the mana Ashbury had fed it. Unencumbered, without her weight slowing it down, the broom flew even faster. And at the end of that burst of speed, it traced an arc across the sky and came back—reaching Ashbury’s hands just as she finally began to fall.

“That’s the Ashbury magic, Nanao Hibiya.”

The broom slipped between her thighs, and her feet caught the stirrups. The broom and the rider joined seamlessly once more—and *already* at full speed. She’d reversed direction far faster than a conventional turn would ever allow, leaving the witch primed to take a run at her opponent. Nanao was at a massive disadvantage, both on speed and positioning.

This was the Ashbury Turn. In the history of broomsports, no one had ever defeated it.

“Down you go.”

The two shadows crossed, and the witch landed a final blow. Awestruck, Nanao swung her own club—

—and a long moment later, the audience learned the outcome.

“Ah—!” Katie clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Nanao!” Chela called her friend’s name.

Guy and Pete could not speak at all.

A girl, falling through the curtains of the clouds from far above. For an agonizingly long time, all they could do was watch.

“……Mm……?”

The cold air rushing past gave way as something softly scooped her up. A gentle warmth, enough to wake her—and she saw a boy’s face peering into hers.

“…Oliver…”

His name escaped her lips. He smiled.

“…Still with us, I see. Any pain? Headaches? Nausea?”

She checked herself over and shook her head. Sensations were returning to her limbs, and realizing that, he set her on the ground. She was steady now.

"Time you left the field, then. You lost this one, Nanao."

He put a hand on her shoulder. There was a long silence. The Azian girl looked up at the battlefield above and nodded.

"…A magnificent adversary. She left no latitude for rancor."

"Awww, Hibiya's down! Her first-ever loss! Even our most promising rookie can't handle the magic! The catcher Mr. Horn caught her safely and is escorting her out of the pitch," said the commentator. "Diana Ashbury remains a terror! The Ashbury Turn prevails! Is there no one who can defeat it?!"

"Don't sell it *too* hard. Sure, it's amazing, but the audience can't *see* it," Hedges grumbled.

Once he saw Ashbury finally break through the clouds herself, he snorted.

"It's her way of showing respect. She'd have won in a normal fight, but she made a point of taking her opponent out with the turn. That's how much Ms. Hibiya's flying impressed her… And I'd call that a pretty promising senior league debut."

"Entirely agree! There's still lots more action to come, superfans! Let's give Ms. Hibiya a big round of applause! We know she'll turn this loss into inspiration and come back even stronger than before!"

While Nanao and Ashbury hogged the limelight, the overall match was pretty even; ultimately, the Blue Swallows emerged with a one-point victory.

"Aw, so close."

"Dammit! We just needed one more!"

The Wild Geese lamented their loss on the way to the team room.

As they entered, Nanao bowed her head to them.

"I was of no use in the back half. My apologies."

"? What are you talking about? You took down a Swallow."

"*And* dueled Ashbury on your senior league debut. That was literally insane."

Her humility was met with praise. She seemed surprised, so the captain came over.

"This isn't a war. Winning matches definitely matters, but the real goal is to show the audience a good time."

"Captain?"

"And in that sense, you delivered in spades. Don't get discouraged, Nanao. Losing to the Ashbury Turn is considered an honor among broomriders."

He gave her a grin and wink. Oliver had been at her side this whole time, clearly waiting for something like this.

“…She’s a powerful foe, but the match itself was winnable,” Oliver said. “Let’s put Nanao in a proper formation next time. And I’ve got some ideas about strategy—”

“Oh, Horn’s all fired up!”

“His wife got dropped! That’d get anyone ticked off.”

“I hear that catch was *extra* gentle.”

“Well, yeah, you gotta be. It was his *wife* falling!”

“…Um, could we please take this a bit more seriously?” Oliver was not good at being teased.

The captain bumped him on the shoulder and turned back to the team. They might have lost the match, but his duties were not yet done.

“Horn’s right. Time for a postmortem. Nanao’s got a feel for the senior league now, so next time, we’re gonna want her working as a fully fledged member of this team,” the captain said. “Looking at the match as a whole, I think we’re a bit too eager on the offensive…”

“……Urp……”

“……Eek……”

Meanwhile, in the Swallows’ room, a boy and girl were standing bolt upright, afraid to sit, shaking like prisoners awaiting execution.

“…? Why are they cowering?”

“Waiting for Ashbury’s lashing. Hibiya nearly downed one and did down the other.”

“Ah.”

This earned them looks of immense pity. But a moment later, a new teammate came in and spared them further terror.

“Relax, you two. Ashbury already left.”

“ ⎯ Huh?”

“She did…?”

“Skipped the postmortem, didn’t even change, just flew outta Dodge with a grin on her face. She must have really enjoyed going against that rookie. Looked like she’d totally forgotten your screwup.”

The teammate shrugged, and the two doomed players collapsed onto the bench behind them.

“…We’re saved…!”

“Thank you, Hibiya… Thank you…!”

“Don’t thank our enemies! I mean, I get it, but…”

The whole team nodded. Win or lose, good or bad, they were always at the mercy of their ace’s mood. That was how the Blue Swallows did things.

“Nanao, Oliver, there you are! Great match!”

“So close! If they’d downed one more, it would’ve gone to overtime!”

Once the meeting was over, Oliver and Nanao found their friends waiting outside. The Azian girl smiled.

“A powerful foe, and my training proved inadequate. I shall hone myself so that I might prevail next time.”

“That’s the spirit. Your potential is limitless, Nanao,” Chela said, putting her arm on the girl’s shoulders.

“If you’re joining us, mind going ahead to the cafeteria and grabbing a table?” Oliver asked. “We’ll catch up as soon as we’ve changed.”

“Sounds good,” Pete said. “Make it quick!”

He headed out, and the other three followed.

As she watched them go, Nanao said, “They’re all too kind. Here I am, fresh from a loss.”

Her tone dropped as she spoke. Oliver stood silently by as she hung her head, fists clenched tight.

“An abject defeat. I never stood a chance…”

He’d never seen her regret anything to this extent, not since they first met. Oliver stepped around in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders. He’d already prepared what to say in this situation long before.

“What matters isn’t winning or losing. What matters is that you’re safe and sound, Nanao.”

This was how he really felt. Not just as her catcher but as her friend.

“You didn’t do any crazy flying, and you fell right toward me. You emerged without any serious injuries. In my book, that’s full marks.”

“ ——— ”

Nanao spoke not a word but simply looked up at him. As they stood alone in the hall, there was a long silence. And then her lips parted.

“Then…”

“?”

“I think full marks deserve a reward, Oliver.”

She spoke in earnest. Aware of that, he thought hard, then cleared his throat, mind made up—and put his arms around her.

The lingering Perfume was long since gone. But still his pulse quickened, and he was forced to control himself.

“…Is that enough?” he asked.

“…Heh-heh-heh.”

With a purr of a laugh, Nanao pulled him close. The comfort of each other's heat made it hard to let go.

"……A touch longer."

"……"

And before he knew it, he'd blown his chance to end the embrace. They stood silently in each other's arms for a good ten minutes.

Dinner was a cheery one, buoyed by talk of the day's match. By the time they headed back to the dorms, it was late. Pete had fallen asleep over a book, and Oliver carried him to bed, pulling the covers over him.

"…Good night, Pete," he said, softly brushing the boy's head.

Certain his friend was asleep, he left the room, then the dorm, and headed into the darkened school building.

By this hour, encroachment left the line between labyrinth and school ill-defined. He quickly chose an entrance and plunged into the first layer. The darkness lurking in these halls made it impossible to stay calm.

"I'm too late—I should hurry."

He checked his watch and picked up his pace. He could feel the mask in his pocket. He'd meant to don it once he met with his compatriots, but given the risk of being seen before he reached them, perhaps he ought to put it on now.

"…Here should do."

He found a secluded corner and reached into his pocket. As his fingers closed around the mask…

"……Mm? Oliver……?"

A voice from behind. His heart leaped out of his chest, and he spun around. *Is that—?* But no; it was a tall boy, in a sleeping bag, inside what appeared to be a basic barrier.

"Guy?! What are you—?!"

"Oh…it *is* you, Oliver," Guy replied sleepily. "Kevin's suggestion. Good way to get used to labyrinth camping… Hey…did you just hide something?"

Guy was rubbing his eyes but had spotted Oliver's hasty motion. To cover, he quickly switched the mask for something else, pulling out a pack of cookies.

"…Just nibbling on a little provisions. Want one?"

"Oh…nah, I'm good… Too…sleepy…"

Guy drifted off again, but something about the way he rolled over bothered Oliver, and he knelt down next to his friend.

"Wait, Guy, lemme see your back."

"Mm…?"

Guy looked up, bleary-eyed; Oliver forcefully peeled the sleeping bag off him, then pulled off his shirt. His body was covered in fresh cuts and scratches.

"…What are these?!" Oliver gasped. "You just…smeared ointment on them? No healing spells?!"

“Ah…yeah, that’s the thing. I can’t use healing spells yet. And with my skills as they are, I’m not getting around the second layer uninjured.”

“Then don’t go solo! Stay still; I’ll heal you up!”

Oliver pulled out his wand, shaking his head.

“Seriously, both you and Pete… And Katie was always like this, too. You’ve got all the nerves in the world, but this is clearly going too far. Nothing’s even happened yet—”

“But once anything does, it’s too late. You gotta train yourself now, or you’ll be helpless when shit goes down.”

Guy had his back to Oliver, letting the healing magic work. His voice was grim.

“Getting down to the second layer made that real clear to me. I know how much danger you were all in and how crazy it is you guys came back safe…not to mention just how weak I am.”

“……”

“I can’t catch up to you sitting on my heels. So lemme go too far. Long as it doesn’t kill me, right? And next time…”

He locked an arm around Oliver’s head. As he pulled his friend close, Guy’s voice grew even more intense.

“Next time, I ain’t letting you go alone.”

This was clearly Guy’s main motivation. The arm around his neck made Oliver painfully aware of that, and he smiled.

“…You’re getting pretty ripe, Guy.”

“Aw, shut up. It’s a guy thing. Can it.”

“…True, I’ve never been one to mind a little sweat myself.”

He nodded and gently freed himself, standing up.

“Sorry I woke you,” Oliver apologized. “Still, if you’re gonna camp here, put the alarm line farther out. And don’t be late for class.”

“You got it. Redrawing it’s a real pain, though…”

But the boy started fixing the magic circle.

Oliver left, mad at himself for failing to notice Guy lying there.

Get it together. A mistake like that could cost you.

He walked for a good length of time, finally reaching a room off the passage—the prearranged meeting spot. His comrades were all assembled.

“Oh, there you are, Your Majesty.”

The group of six included Gwyn, Shannon, Teresa—and the plainspoken seventh-year girl who’d been at the last meeting. She gave him a look of appraisal.

“Not in the best mood there, huh? You gonna be okay? We’re in for a long night, you know. Could be rough on a second-year.”

A blunt question, equal parts concern and condescension. He knew that but merely shook his head, not arguing. He thought it was only fair that the older students would feel that way. And the best way to change their minds was to show what he could do.

“Noll…,” Shannon said. Hers was *all* concern. But he couldn’t afford to let her indulge him. He wasn’t her brother here; he was her lord. Even if he still had to remind himself of that.

Certain the coast was clear, he pulled out the mask and put it on. Then he took his place at the head of the group, speaking over his shoulder.

“Come. Let’s scout the field of battle.”

He set out, and his comrades followed. They melted into the darkness of the labyrinth. No one here showed any hesitation—not even if in the not too distant future, this darkness might consume them.

END

Afterword

Greetings again. This is Bokuto Uno. The curtain has risen on the second year at Kimberly.

The older students still see the newly minted second-years as mere fledglings, but having a fresh crop beneath them has forced the young mages to change their outlook. They know how weak and unprepared they were a year ago, as well as how far they've come and how far they have yet to go.

But of course—that's only if they *survive*. The mind of a mage and the power that goes with it—obtaining each in measure within the school year means being consumed by that much more darkness.

The boy who once donned a mask is no longer a mere second-year student.

He is leading his comrades into battle against a mad old warlock—the greatest builder of this age—with all the baggage that implies.

And you, too, shall learn how vast the walls he and his fellows seek to scale—the top as yet unseen.

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